

The 90 percent “no” vote at Deere and the ?growing rebellion against the corporatist unions

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On Sunday, workers at the agricultural and construction equipment maker Deere & Co. voted by 90 percent to reject a tentative agreement backed by the United Auto Workers (UAW).

The vote was a stunning rebuke to the UAW, which tried to rush through a six-year concessions contract for 10,100 workers without giving them sufficient time to study it. At so-called informational meetings Sunday, workers angrily confronted union officials trying to sell the deal. “Deere and the UAW tried to pull a fast one, but the rank and file fought back,” a worker at the Dubuque, Iowa plant told the WSWS.

Confronting an incipient revolt, the UAW announced it was setting a strike deadline for 11:59 p.m. Wednesday night. Behind the scenes, however, the UAW executives are doing everything they can to block a strike or isolate and defeat a walkout if it is forced to call one.

The vote at Deere, the first defeat of a UAW-backed agreement at the company in 35 years, is the latest in a series of overwhelming “no” votes by workers in the US in response to union-supported contracts:

- On April 9, **1,100 Warrior Met coal miners** in central Alabama voted 1,006 to 45 (96 percent) to reject the contract pushed by the United Mine Workers of America, which failed to recoup the \$6 wage cut the UMWA accepted in 2016.

- In the late spring and early summer, **3,500 Volvo Trucks** workers in Dublin, Virginia, voted down three consecutive UAW-backed contracts, the first two by 90 percent or more. The UAW was only able to shut down a five-week strike by forcing a revote on the third rejected deal, which it claimed passed by 17 votes.

- In August and early September, **3,500 auto parts workers at Dana Inc.**—a top supplier for Deere—rejected a five-year contract proposed by the UAW and United Steelworkers by more than 90 percent, with workers at the Toledo, Ohio plant voting unanimously against the deal. More than a month after the defeat of the contract, the UAW

and USW are blocking a strike that would have an immediate impact on the auto industry, keeping workers on the job and stockpiling parts with a day-by-day contract extension.

- **Twelve thousand carpenters in western Washington state** rejected four consecutive agreements pushed by the Northwest Pacific Carpenters Union (NWCU) by margins as high as 76 percent. The NWCU was forced to call a strike on September 16, but it kept 10,000 of the 12,000 carpenters working and ultimately pushed through a fifth contract.

- Late last week, **McLaren Health nurse aides and other service workers in Flint and other mid-Michigan cities** rejected by a three-to-one margin a deal reached by the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) to block a strike over dangerously high patient ratios and increased out-of-pocket health costs.

That massive, nearly unanimous “no” votes are now becoming the norm gives expression to enormous anger and determination to fight among workers. The union bureaucracy’s age-old methods of ramming through pro-company contracts—lies about winning “substantial gains” or “the best contract you are going to get” and the use of threats and economic pressure to browbeat workers—are running up against a wall of opposition.

This is part of the emergence of the largest strike movement in the United States in generations. The first five days of October saw the beginning of 10 new strikes in the US, including 2,500 nurses at Mercy Hospital in Buffalo, New York, and 1,400 Kellogg’s food-processing workers in Michigan and other states. In addition, 60,000 Hollywood film and television workers and 35,000 Kaiser Permanente health care workers have voted to strike.

“Thousands of workers have gone on strike across the country, showing their growing power in a tightening economy,” *Time* magazine wrote last week. “The leverage US employees have over the people signing their paychecks was amplified in Friday’s jobs report, which showed that

employers added workers at a much slower-than-expected pace in September,” *Time* wrote, adding, “and wages are continuing to tick up across industries as employers become more desperate to hire and retain workers.”

The *Philadelphia Inquirer* pointed to a “new take-this-job-and-shove-it mentality,” noting that “the upside-down condition of the job market has fed-up workers more inclined to fight back and call their bosses on their threats...”

There are certain characteristics of this emerging movement that are particularly significant.

First, the development of the class struggle is pitting workers in direct opposition to the corporatist trade unions. The margin of the contract rejections at Deere, Volvo, Dana and other companies expresses the real relationship between the so-called “unions” and the working class.

These organizations, which function as a labor police force for management and are run by union executives with incomes in the top 5 percent of income earners, if not higher, are completely disconnected from and hostile to the needs and aspirations of the workers they falsely claim to “represent.” Under conditions of explosive social anger, their primary concern is to prove their usefulness to management and the state by ramming through pro-company agreements one way or another.

The Biden administration is aggressively promoting the unions as instruments to suppress working class resistance and divert social opposition behind its plans for trade war and military confrontation with China. Last week, a White House pro-union “task force” held its second official meeting, with top military and economic cabinet members—including Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas and Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo—discussing final preparations of a report on steps the administration will take to promote the expansion of the trade unions.

The defenders of the authority of the unions among the pseudo-left, themselves aligned with the Biden administration and the Democratic Party, refer to the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* as “sectarian” because of our call for the formation of rank-and-file committees. Their principal concern, however, is that the campaign led by the WSWS for the development of independent organizations of working class struggle is winning a mass response.

At Deere, WSWS articles have been read by thousands of workers, who have distributed them at the plants and shared them on social media. As with the Dana workers and Volvo Trucks workers before them, the WSWS has been central in encouraging and assisting Deere workers in developing their own independent initiative through the formation of a rank-and-file committee.

Second, the upsurge of working class struggles in the US is part of an international process. This includes the strikes by 150,000 metal workers in South Africa; 90,000 health care workers in Sri Lanka; health care, train and airport workers in Germany; and the October 1 UK parents’ strike and “global picket line” against the spread of COVID-19. Global corporations like Deere, which has operations in 70 countries, can be fought only by unifying the working class across all national borders.

Third, the growth of the class struggle is inseparably connected to the struggle against the pandemic. The ruling class is seeking to suppress wages in the face of rising prices for food, fuel and other necessities. At the same time, it is imposing ever-longer hours and relentless speedup in its scramble to offset the global supply chain crisis, as well as labor shortages driven by millions refusing to labor in COVID-infected workplaces.

Over the last 20 months of the pandemic, millions of lives have been sacrificed for corporate profit, while the world’s billionaires have seen their wealth surge by \$5.5 trillion. Far from making any concessions to the “heroes” and “essential workers” who have endured sickness and death, the corporate and financial oligarchy is determined to exploit the pandemic to establish a “new normal” of unrelenting exploitation. But this is provoking a growing strike wave in the US and internationally, under conditions where the efforts to force workers back into unsafe workplaces by eliminating unemployment benefits and ending eviction moratoriums have thus far failed to produce the intended results.

On May 1, the International Committee of the Fourth International initiated the call for the formation of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) to organize a global response by the working class to save lives. Now the struggle to demand policies to eradicate the pandemic, including the closure of nonessential workplaces and schools, is intersecting with a growing movement against capitalist exploitation.

We call on all workers at Deere and all sections of the working class, in the US and internationally, to register and attend the October 24 online webinar with leading scientists, “How to end the pandemic: The case for eradication,” co-sponsored by the WSWS and the IWA-RFC.



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