

Deere announces plans to maintain operations with strikebreakers, as Dana auto parts workers press to join walkout

Marcus Day
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To learn more about joining the John Deere Workers Rank-and-File Committee, Deere workers can email deerewrfc@gmail.com or text (484) 514-9797.

On the first day of their strike against multinational agricultural equipment maker Deere & Company, workers voiced their determination to win significant gains in wages and benefits for themselves and the next generation and carry out a successful struggle against the corporate giant.

“Today is a historic day,” a worker at Deere’s Dubuque, Iowa, plant told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “Workers are on the pickets and are very excited. We’re watching Deere’s stock fall, and we know we can hurt them bad. We’re fighting back! We told the union we are going to stand our ground.

“John Deere management yesterday tried talking to us about the contract. They kept telling us we have a better deal than CAT and CNH. I told them we don’t see those workers as competitors. We want the best for them, we want the best for workers everywhere.”

The walkout by over 10,000 workers in Iowa, Illinois, and Kansas, as well as parts centers in Georgia and Colorado, is the first at the company in 35 years and follows workers’ crushing rejection on Sunday of a contract pushed by the United Auto Workers. The deal would have kept wage increases well below the current inflation rate of 5.4 percent and would have eliminated pensions for new hires, further expanding the divisive tier system first accepted by the UAW in 1997.

Workers at Deere have formed the John Deere Rank-and-File Committee to organize workers independently of the UAW and take control of the strike.

The struggle at Deere is part of a growing wave of strikes in the US and internationally. In the largest single walkout globally, 155,000 striking metalworkers in South Africa were joined by over 16,000 more workers on Thursday, fighting for wage increases to compensate for surging inflation. In the US, there are ongoing strikes at Deere, Kellogg’s, hospitals and other industries, with the potential to be drastically expanded in the coming week. A strike deadline by 60,000 TV and film production workers expires on Sunday, and nearly unanimous strike authorization votes have been recorded by tens of thousands of Kaiser Permanente health care workers in California.

At Deere, the company has responded to the strike by issuing an arrogant challenge to workers, announcing it is initiating plans to

maintain operations with strikebreakers. “In response to news of the UAW’s strike, we have activated our Customer Service Continuation (CSC) Plan,” the company wrote in a statement texted to workers Thursday morning. “As part of John Deere’s CSC plan, employees and others will be entering our factories daily to keep our operations running. Our immediate concern is meeting the needs of our customers, who work in time-sensitive and critical industries such as agriculture and construction.”

Deere is desperate to keep parts flowing to its dealers as corn and soybean harvests take place throughout the Midwest. Record crop yields and rising farm commodity prices have combined with labor and supply shortages to create high demand and delays for agricultural equipment parts even before the strike began. “Even though farmers are very resilient, if something breaks now, rather than taking hours it could take days to fix,” Brian Strasser, a manager at Sinclair Tractor in Kalona, Iowa, told *Crain’s Chicago Business*.

Deere is reportedly focusing on sending salaried personnel to its parts distribution center (PDC) in Milan, Illinois, its main hub for North America. A striking worker at the facility told the WSWs Thursday afternoon that Deere “brought in all the office people and supervisors.”

While Deere is claiming it can’t afford demands for higher wages and the restoration of pensions and fully paid health care, workers are well aware that the company has been making billions since the last contract in 2015, with its profits projected to approach \$6 billion for the current fiscal year, far above its previous record.

The UAW, however, is completely opposed to carrying out a serious struggle. Up until the last moment, it had been desperately looking for some fig leaf of a compromise from Deere to justify calling off the walkout, meeting in closed-door talks with the company late Wednesday. Deere, however, has dug in on its demands to end pensions for new workers and contain wage costs. After workers rejected its contract proposal by 90 percent Sunday, the company sent managers out onto shop floors to try to sell the already defeated agreement in the lead-up to the strike.

Shortly after the midnight strike deadline, the UAW public relations team posted a thoroughly dishonest statement on its website. “Our members at John Deere strike for the ability to earn a decent living, retire with dignity and establish fair work rules,” Chuck Browning, Vice President for Ford and director of the

UAW's Agricultural Implement Department, stated. UAW President Ray Curry said in the statement, "The almost one million UAW retirees and active members stand in solidarity with the striking UAW members at John Deere."

In reality, the UAW had been pushing a contract that does nothing to address workers' demands for higher wages, pensions and fully paid health care for all, and better working conditions. As for Curry—the architect of the sellout of the Volvo Trucks strike earlier this year—and his claims of "solidarity," they will ring utterly hollow to workers who have seen one UAW executive after another indicted for bribery and embezzlement of dues in recent years.

Speaking on the impact of the WSWS' warnings about the pro-corporate character of the UAW, the worker at Dubuque said, "I truly believe that because of your reporting about the UAW corruption and your warnings that the UAW was going to screw us over all the way back in 2015, many workers today feel like they can speak out openly against the UAW during meetings and to their faces. I know I have, and many of my co-workers have as well."

Far from seeking to strengthen the strike by mobilizing its hundreds of thousands of members, the UAW is operating with a strategy to sabotage the struggle at Deere at the earliest opportunity and ram its original sellout through, as it did at Volvo earlier this year.

The case in point can be seen at the auto parts maker Dana Inc., where the UAW and United Steelworkers union have forced 3,500 workers in the Midwest and South to stay on the job under a day-to-day contract extension since early September. The unions have been dragging out "talks" with the company, helping it stockpile parts, despite workers' 90 percent rejection of their tentative agreement and an overwhelming strike authorization vote.

With the initiation of the Deere workers' walkout, however, pressure is rapidly building among Dana workers to join the struggle. "We're all hearing about it, and we think it's great they are standing up," a Dana worker in Tennessee told the WSWS. "Our union isn't there for us, otherwise they wouldn't be letting us work and work and work without a contract."

"The John Deere workers have our support. 'Why can't we go on strike like they are' is something I hear all the time."

There is growing anxiety within the financial aristocracy and its political representatives over the building strike wave in the US. While nearly unlimited funds have been unleashed by the Federal Reserve, fueling the frenzied speculation on the stock market, the capitalists fear that any significant rise in wages in one sector would lead to an uncontrollable eruption of workers' struggles, threatening to blow apart the low-wage set-up on which vast fortunes have been built.

The Biden administration and the Democratic Party have thus been seeking to shore up the increasingly tattered credibility of the trade unions, which they are relying on to contain workers' opposition and enforce the ruling class' deadly policy of forcing children and workers into unsafe schools and workplaces in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Asked about the Deere strike by a reporter Thursday, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki avoided speaking directly about

the walkout, saying instead, "Both the president and vice president have often said that this is the most pro-union administration in history and they will continue to govern and lead with that in mind."

She continued, "It's also the responsibility of management and the union to bargain with each other and resolve their differences. That's a part of why unions are around and the role they play." In other words, the responsibility of the unions is to "bargain" with management, i.e., take their demands to drive down labor costs and implement them, as has been the case uninterrupted for nearly 40 years.

While the corporate media, along with the Democratic Party's pseudo-left allies such as *Labor Notes* and *Jacobin* magazine, have been relentlessly and falsely promoting the UAW and other unions as the leaders of an incipient working-class movement, in reality, workers in every struggle are coming into direct conflict with the pro-corporate executives who run the "unions."

At companies such as Volvo, Dana, and Deere, workers have begun taking matters into their own hands, organizing independently of the UAW. The John Deere Workers Rank-and-File Committee, formed by workers last week to oppose the UAW's attempt to push through another sellout, issued a new statement Thursday demanding workers receive full income from the UAW's nearly \$800 million strike fund (not the \$275 a week the union is planning), an expansion of the strike to Dana, and an end to the UAW's backroom talks with the company.

The committee also outlined the minimal basis of a contract that Deere workers will accept, including a 30 percent general wage increase, the end of the tier system, and fully paid pensions and health care for retirees. Significantly, the statement also appealed for support from workers at Deere's operations in other countries, which are found on virtually every continent.

The task facing Deere workers now is to carry forward their momentum and press the offensive against the company, and not allow the UAW to starve out and isolate their struggle. This means that rank-and-file strike committees must be formed at every Deere plant and warehouse, in order to link up with Dana workers, autoworkers and Deere workers internationally, forming the basis for a powerful movement by the working class to secure its interests.

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