

Biden administration sends agriculture secretary to feign support at Deere picket line, while company secures court injunction against strike

Marcus Day
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The US secretary of agriculture, Tom Vilsack, made an official appearance at a Deere workers' picket line on Wednesday, an indication of the growing concerns within the Biden administration over the strike and its anxiety that the walkout be brought to a swift conclusion.

The strike by roughly 10,000 workers in Iowa, Illinois and other states at agricultural and construction equipment manufacturer Deere is set to enter its second week on Thursday. The walkout began after workers rebelled against a tentative agreement pushed by the United Auto Workers union (UAW), voting it down by 90 percent. The UAW's deal with Deere would have kept raises well below inflation, entailing a cut in real wages, as well as eliminated pensions for new hires, establishing yet another tier.

Deere has made clear that it is opposed to workers' demands for higher wages and the restoration of fully paid health care and pensions, even though it is making record profits. The UAW announced that it had resumed its closed-door talks with the company on Monday, but has said nothing concretely about what it is supposedly demanding.

The deployment of a cabinet-level official to a picket line is highly unusual, if not unprecedented. It follows the similarly unprecedented intervention by Biden himself in the unionization vote at an Amazon warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama, earlier this year. As with the earlier statement, the appearance by Vilsack is a politically calculated move on the part of the Biden administration. The Biden White House, which has pledged to be the most "pro-union" administration in American history, is relying on the unions to suppress the largest outbreak of the class struggle in America in four decades. Its intervention on the picket line at Deere is aimed at shoring up support for the increasingly discredited UAW bureaucracy, while pressing it to shut down the strike as quickly as possible.

The Democrats and the UAW are working to soften workers up and get them to lower their guard at the same time as Deere

is dramatically escalating its strikebreaking efforts. On the same day Vilsack made his appearance, a pro-business judge granted Deere an injunction against striking workers at its plant in Davenport, Iowa, which seeks to neuter their pickets.

Chief Judge Marlita Greve's order would prevent mass picketing, setting a limit of just four workers at each gate. Moreover, in an extremely provocative move, the injunction bans the use of chairs and fire barrels, even as overnight lows in the area are set to reach freezing temperatures this weekend.

UAW Local 281 in Davenport issued a statement on Facebook Thursday ordering workers to abide by the injunction without even making the faintest hint of criticism of it. As of this writing, the UAW headquarters has issued no statement on the injunction.

The support of the UAW for the enforcement of the injunction sheds further light on the transformation of the union into a corrupt stooge of management. In 1937, during the Flint sit-down strike, which established it as a mass industrial organization, the UAW ignored a strike injunction and even resisted assaults on the strike by police. Judge Edward S. Black, who issued the injunction, was later disbarred from the case after it was revealed that he owned thousands of shares in GM stock.

Now, however, rather than mounting any effort to mobilize opposition to Deere's efforts to use the courts to break the strike, the UAW focused its attention on piling fawning praise on Vilsack, asking striking workers to attend even if they were not on picket duty, and offering van rides from the union hall. An official for UAW Local 450, which covers Deere's plant near Des Moines, Iowa, wrote on its Facebook page: "UAW folks: PLEASE PLEASE IF YOUR AVAILABLE COME TO GATE ONE!! This is a big deal the secretary of Agricultural is coming to show support THIS IS A BIG DEAL [sic]!!!"

The selection of Tom Vilsack, an experienced defender of agribusiness, as Biden's man on the ground is significant. Vilsack was governor of Iowa from 1999 to 2007 and served as

agriculture secretary in the Obama administration. Under Obama, Vilsack spearheaded weaker rules for the poultry industry that enabled significant increases in workers' line speeds.

After leaving the Obama administration, Vilsack secured a lucrative "revolving door" position at the US Dairy Export Council, a lobby for "Big Dairy," making an estimated \$3.6 million in four years, according to *Forbes*, before being asked to serve again as agriculture secretary by Biden. His return to the position was warmly welcomed by major agribusiness interests, with Pat McGonegle, chief executive of Iowa Pork Producers, telling the *Sioux City Journal* late last year, "We see it as a positive thing, and we appreciate he's willing to come back to do it because he's an experienced guy."

Vilsack has long combined his subservience to big business with the cultivation of close relations with the pro-corporate trade unions, particularly the UAW. The UAW has responded in kind, donating more than \$200,000 to Vilsack's campaigns for governor from 1998 to 2004, according to *FollowTheMoney.org*.

At the picket, Vilsack issued condescending platitudes, saying workers "need somebody to give them a pat on the back."

At the same time, he was at pains to declare his support for the company against which workers are engaged in a bitter struggle. "John Deere's a great company. They ought to be able to get this worked out to a point where it's fair to the workers, to make sure that we continue to have the equipment and farm machinery that's important to American agriculture."

The "great company" Vilsack hailed is in the midst of reviving all the old methods of class warfare and strikebreaking, as evidenced by the court injunction issued Wednesday.

In an indication of the Biden administration's pressure on the UAW to shut down the strike at the earliest opportunity, Vilsack continued, "The UAW is important to me, I sincerely hope that they get these things resolved as quickly as possible and as fairly as possible."

There are no doubt intense talks behind the scenes between Deere's executives, the White House, and the UAW over how to overcome workers' resistance and torpedo the struggle. Both Deere and the UAW were caught by surprise by the scale of workers' opposition to the tentative agreement, which the union falsely claimed contained "significant economic gains."

The Biden administration and Democratic Party as a whole, including self-described "progressives" such as Senators Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, have sought to posture as supporters of Deere workers' demands for higher wages. However, the reality is that the Democrats, one of the two main big business parties, are terrified that the rebellion at Deere will spread, initiating a tidal wave of strikes against low wages and abysmal working conditions.

In a relatively more honest assessment of the feelings at the

White House, a CNN Business correspondent, Allison Kosik, said last week that the Deere strike is "yet another headache for the Biden administration, which is dealing with huge pressures on the economy, including supply chain pressures and inflation, and now you have a kind of a situation where you have a lot of workers rising up and saying we want better."

The media, particularly pseudo-left outlets such as *Labor Notes* and *Jacobin* magazine, have been equating the trade unions with the growing insurgency of workers for higher wages, while claiming that the White House is playing a supporting role. The reality, however, is that rank-and-file workers are pitted in struggle against the companies, the pro-corporate "unions," and the Democratic and Republican parties, which represent the interests of Wall Street and the corporations.

The efforts by *Labor Notes* and the Democratic Socialists of America to promote Biden as a "friend of labor" are particularly grotesque given his role, along with Obama, in forcing through the vast expansion of the tier system and a 50 percent pay cut for new hires at General Motors and Chrysler during the bailout of the auto industry. In exchange for its support for the scheme, the UAW was handed billions of dollars in company stock.

While Deere workers face vicious enemies, and just as dangerous false friends, they have more powerful potential allies. The Deere strike has already won widespread support among broad sections of workers in the US and internationally, who have been inspired by the courageous stand taken by Deere workers.

It is to these forces—Dana auto parts workers and other autoworkers, Caterpillar workers, and Deere workers internationally—that Deere workers must turn in order to mobilize the necessary support to win their strike. This must be combined with the expansion of organizations independent of the UAW throughout all the Deere plants, linking up with the Deere Workers Rank-and-File Committee, to conduct the fight on the strongest possible basis.

We urge workers to learn more about joining the John Deere Workers Rank-and-File Committee. Email deerewrfc@gmail.com or text (484) 514-9797.



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