

As strike enters third week, John Deere workers dig in for a fight against company and UAW

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More than 10,000 John Deere workers will enter their third week on strike tomorrow against the multinational agricultural and construction equipment manufacturer. The workers walked out October 14 after rejecting a six-year concessions contract proposal by 90 percent. The deal, backed by the United Auto Workers (UAW), included wage increases below the current inflation rate of more than 5 percent and the elimination of pensions for new hires.

Deere workers in Iowa, Illinois, Kansas and other states are digging in for a protracted struggle. The company, which is forecasting full-year profits of \$5.9 billion, 70 percent higher than the previous annual record of \$3.5 billion in 2013, is adamantly opposing workers' demands for substantial wage and benefit improvements. Workers also want to overturn decades of UAW-backed concessions, including the hated two-tier wage and benefit system.

Deere is using salaried workers as strikebreakers and has gotten an injunction from a pro-company judge in Davenport, Iowa, which bans mass picketing and limits pickets to four at each gate. The injunction also prohibits the use of chairs and fire barrels, even as temperatures drop sharply in the Midwest.

In addition to the company, workers are in a battle against the UAW, which is deliberately isolating the strike and imposing an information blackout on supposed negotiations with the company. As in previous struggles, like the 2019 General Motors and 2021 Volvo Trucks strike, the UAW is putting workers on starvation rations of \$275 a week in strike pay. This amounts to less than the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour even though the UAW national headquarters sits on a strike fund worth \$790 million.

“It is just like everything else,” a Deere worker from

Des Moines, Iowa told the *World Socialist Web Site*. The UAW, he said, “was caught off guard just like the company by [the] 90 percent no vote. I was told today they are ‘hoping’ to have checks this Saturday. This pay is ridiculous. \$275 per week is just to make sure that people can’t last long.

“If they were genuine about getting us a good contract, they would pay us more than that, or they would say go get another job. They are not doing either. Personally, I am looking for another job, just like many other people in order to last as long as needed to get what we want.”

A Deere worker from Waterloo, Iowa told the WSWS, “I did hear the company drained the line and warehoused what they could. They produced three machines last week. The whole week they only produced three. We can do 15 to 20 daily. The only reason they got three machines was because they drained the line. Most of those machines were 80 percent already built for them by us.”

Deere workers are in a strategically powerful position to win their demands. The lack of new farm equipment and replacement parts during the harvest season threatens the profits of the giant agribusinesses and billions of dollars of US exports of corn, soybeans and other crops to China and other countries. Texas Farm Bureau President Russell Boening told KTRH News Radio that three- to five-day delays in equipment repairs “could be devastating” to production and profits and could trigger an even sharper rise in food prices, at a time when inflation is at its highest level in decades.

Even more importantly, their walkout takes place as what is potentially the largest strike wave in generations is unfolding. This includes strikes by nurses in several states, Kellogg’s food processing workers and others. This movement is fueled by the erosion of wages by

inflation, exhausting work schedules and anger among workers over being forced to risk their lives during the pandemic while US billionaires saw their fortunes rise by \$2 trillion, or 70 percent.

The UAW and other unions, working with the Biden administration, have done everything to try to block this movement, which threatens to upend the decades-long run-up on the stock market, fueled by endless government bailouts and decades of wage and benefit concessions handed over by the unions.

Over the last two weeks, the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) has blocked a strike of 60,000 Hollywood film and television workers who overwhelmingly supported strike action. After Dana workers voted down by 90 percent a pro-company contract pushed by the UAW and United Steelworkers, the unions blocked a strike by 3,500 workers, which would have cut off axles and other parts to the Detroit automakers and Deere. After two months of delays, lies and intimidation, the unions are currently pushing through a second deal, which is virtually the same as the first.

At Kaiser Permanente health care facilities in California, some 24,000 union members voted by 96 percent to strike this month after voting down a contract proposal which significantly lowered pay, which the Union of Health Care Professionals and the United Nurses Association of California has blocked.

The ruling class is increasingly fearful that the unions will not be able to hold back this movement. After weeks of news articles on the strike wave which falsely claimed the unions were leading these struggles, *Time* magazine published an article this week which partially acknowledged that this movement was in fact a rebellion against the unions.

The piece entitled “Workers are Furious. Their Unions Are Scrambling to Catch Up,” says “James Geiger, a 53-year-old John Deere machinist in Waterloo, Iowa, is fed up with two things.” After citing his comments about high levels of mandatory overtime and earning less pay and pension benefits than those hired before 1997, it says, “The other thing getting under Geiger’s skin is how his union, United Auto Workers (UAW), is handling this moment. After all, it was the UAW that agreed to the contract of the two-tiered system back in the 1990s. ‘We don’t trust the international [union],’ says Geiger. ‘They brought that lousy contract for us to vote on.’”

The article continues, “Geiger’s frustration with his union is not unique. In recent weeks, as tens of thousands of workers from Colorado to Georgia have gone on strike

to demand better pay and work conditions, much of the organizing has been driven by workers themselves. The dynamic has left national and international union leaderships scrambling to keep up with their own members’ decisions to strike, their shifting goals, and how to support the social media-driven communications strategies workers are employing.”

Far from “supporting” the social media strategies that workers are employing to circumvent the censorship and lies of the union bureaucracy, the UAW and other unions are trying to block the growing communication networks of workers.

In particular, the UAW is fearful that Deere workers, like Volvo Trucks, Dana and other auto and auto parts workers have formed rank-and-file committees, with the assistance of the WSWS, to take the conduct of these struggles out of the hands of the corporatist unions.

The Deere Workers Rank-and-File Committee led the fight against the sellout contract and is now fighting the news blackout and sabotage of the strike by the UAW. The DWRFC has established lines of communication with Dana and Volvo Trucks workers to discuss their experiences and elaborate to unify their struggles.

The WSWS has also brought news of the struggle of striking workers to Deere workers in Mannheim, Germany, who voiced their support for the struggle of their brothers and sisters and uniting all 70,000 Deere workers across 30 countries.

Workers looking for more information on building rank-and-file committees may contact the WSWS. They can also email the John Deere Workers Rank-and-File Committee at deerewrfc@gmail.com or send a text to (484) 514-9797.



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