

Deere workers speak out following tragic death of striker: “His death will not be in vain”

Marcus Day, George Gallanis
28 October 2021

Striking Deere workers continue to voice their grief and anger following the tragic death of their coworker, 56-year-old Richard Rich, early Wednesday morning. At the same time, the workers in the third week of their strike are expressing their redoubled determination to prevail in their demands against the giant agricultural and construction equipment manufacturer.

Shortly after 6 a.m. Wednesday, Rich, a 15-year veteran at the company, was struck by a vehicle and killed while crossing a major road near Deere’s Parts Distribution Center (PDC) in Milan, Illinois. The facility is Deere’s main parts hub for North America and is located less than 10 miles from Deere’s global headquarters in nearby Moline.

As of this writing, much remains unknown about the immediate circumstances behind the incident. A worker at PDC told the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* Thursday afternoon that they had not yet learned who was driving the vehicle that killed Rich. Milan Police Department officials have stated that they do not believe Rich was intentionally struck or that the driver violated any traffic laws, but the event is still under investigation.

The road Rich was crossing, the Rock Island-Milan Parkway, is an expressway near the parts center. Since Deere has prohibited striking workers from parking on its property, many workers have been compelled to park in an area east of the parkway and cross it on foot at a dangerous intersection which lacks a crosswalk and is poorly lighted to get to their pickets closer to the facility.

On the second day of their strike nearly two weeks ago, workers had filed a complaint with the Milan city government about streetlights being broken in the area, according to a report in Iowa’s *Des Moines Register*. Local media reported that workers for Davenport Electric came out to fix the lights Thursday.

Rich’s death bears certain similarities, based on what’s known so far, to the death of a striking GM worker in 2019, who was hit by an SUV while crossing a bridge on the way to his picket.

Deere has been bringing in strikebreakers to the parts center and other plants since the walkout began, secured a punitive

court injunction against picketers in Davenport, Iowa last week, and sought another one in Des Moines. In a perfunctory statement following the death Wednesday, the company’s director of public relations wrote, “We are saddened by the tragic accident and death of one of our employees who was struck by a vehicle before dawn this morning while crossing the Rock Island Milan Beltway in Milan, Illinois. All of us at John Deere express our deepest condolences to their family and friends. We have no further details as we await reports from law enforcement.”

Many Deere workers, however, have placed blame on the company for the circumstances that led to Rich’s death. A worker from Des Moines, Iowa, told the WSWS, “Deere greed got him killed. If they would have given us a fair contract the first go-around, he would be working and that would have never happened. He would still be alive. Blood is on their hands.”

“It makes me very sad,” a worker from Dubuque, Iowa, said. “After a 90 percent ‘No’ vote, it’s like each and every one of them [who voted no] became my immediate family.”

Another Deere worker from the Des Moines plant said, “I’m sad for him and his family. There’s no money that can replace him. He was there standing up for our rights. He would not have been there if the company acknowledged what we were worth. They’re always talking about how we’re ‘team players,’ but it’s just a stunt for public relations. We’re on the ‘same team’ only when it benefits them.

“For Rich to die in such a way is so frustrating considering it was entirely preventable,” he continued. “They requested those lights to be fixed where he got hit by the car. It’s always reactionary, never preventative. It took the loss of life for someone to fix the lights. This is just how it is at John Deere. When you talk about safety and issues, they’ll brush you off until someone gets hurt, or dies.”

Deere workers have suffered industrial accidents leading to several amputations in recent years, the *Quad City Times* reported Thursday. At Davenport Works alone, three incidents between 2013 to 2018 led to amputations, according to the newspaper’s review of records by the Occupational Safety and

Health Administration (OSHA).

However, as is frequently the case with OSHA penalties even with blatant corporate negligence, fines levied in response to the accidents were ludicrously small in comparison to Deere's annual multibillion profits, amounting to only a few thousand dollars in the first two cases, and in the latter case, a little over \$40,000. Even these trifling amounts were contested by the company and were subsequently cut in nearly half by OSHA.

The strike by over 10,000 Deere workers, which entered its third week Thursday, has been fueled by pent-up anger over years of attacks on wages and benefits—which have been enforced with the help of the United Auto Workers union (UAW)—as well as growing outrage over dangerous working conditions which have worsened considerably since the onset of the pandemic. As demands for Deere's agricultural equipment have increased with rising farm income over the last year, a labor shortage has simultaneously led the company to exert increasing pressure and speedup on its workforce.

The UAW had hoped to avoid calling a strike at Deere, keeping workers in the dark about its "negotiations" with the company before announcing a deal the day after the expiration of its previous six-year contract with the company.

However, workers were almost universally united against terms backed by the UAW, which would have kept wage increases below inflation and ended pensions for new hires, despite Deere making record profits. The UAW-endorsed contract was roundly rejected by 90 percent on October 10.

Feeling it had no choice but to call a walkout, the UAW has since resorted to its playbook "perfected" during the 2019 GM strike and the strike at Volvo Trucks earlier this year, seeking to isolate the struggle from its hundreds of thousands of other members, while keeping Deere strikers in the dark on its ongoing talks with the company and starving them on grossly inadequate strike pay.

The UAW and other unions have been engaged in an increasingly frantic effort to hold back a rising tide of strike action, with nearly 100,000 workers either authorizing strikes or walking out in recent weeks. At auto parts maker and major Deere supplier Dana Inc., the UAW has been working to rush through a contract which maintains low wages and brutally long mandatory overtime.

At Heaven Hill distillery in Kentucky, the United Food and Commercial Workers union shut down a weeks-long strike and declared a contract "ratified" despite a majority of workers—54 percent—voting to reject the deal, with the UFCW claiming its rules required a super-majority of two-thirds for the deal to be rejected. The International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) blocked a strike by 60,000 TV and movie production workers against oppressive and unsafe conditions in the industry, which have been highlighted by the death of cinematographer Halyna Hutchins.

Deere workers will only just begin receiving their \$275 weekly strike checks starting tomorrow, the 16th day of the

strike. Some workers, such as those at the large concentration of Deere operations in Waterloo, Iowa, will have to wait until Saturday, the 17th day of the strike, to receive their checks.

The Des Moines worker denounced the paltry level of strike pay and the UAW's conduct of the walkout, saying, "The whole strike pay is meant to starve us out. How can we survive with \$275 a week? They want us to lose. They want us to cave in and take the new contract. How much money do they have in the damn strike fund? Millions. [As of 2020, \$790 million – WSWS] But, this is all we get?"

He continued, "The UAW functions as a bunch of people patting each other on the back, even on the local level. When a worker joins the union leadership, they're not a worker anymore. They're different. These guys work these cushy jobs now and they don't want to leave them. They will do whatever they need to do to stay there. That's why you have guys in local leadership pushing through these crappy contracts. They're being told what to do and they're okay with that because life is better now for them, and they want to keep it that way. It's the same reason we get these terrible strike pay checks"

He continued, "Just like how your website pointed out about the Brazil union, how they BS'd their support for our strike. The union there is not helping workers; they're selling them out, like they are here. The unions are stabbing workers in the back everywhere. It's an international development."

He spoke in favor of the international support strikers have received from rank-and-file German Deere workers, saying, "I thought it was very important and incredible that workers in Mannheim, Germany were supporting us. That's what we need, we need international support and an international plan."

He concluded, "There is no money and no contract that can replace Rich. This gives us every reason to make sure we get what we want in this contract. His death will not be in vain."

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.



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