

As UAW and Deere maintain information blackout, workers voice determination to fight: “We have a unique opportunity to win”

Marcus Day
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As the strike by over 10,000 at agricultural and construction equipment giant Deere continues in its third week, workers confront a veil of silence maintained by both the company and the United Auto Workers union on the content of their discussions.

Since voting by 90 percent on October 10 to reject the contract proposal backed by the UAW, workers have been kept entirely in the dark on what exactly the UAW is demanding.

This is because the talks between the UAW and Deere have not been “negotiations” between two opponents, as shown by the first pro-company agreement, which failed to meet workers’ demands for significant improvements to wages and benefits and an end to the divisive tier system. Rather, Deere and the UAW are engaged in ongoing planning sessions over how to get the company’s terms through, including keeping wage increases below inflation and further attacking pensions for new hires.

Wall Street is exerting immense pressure on Deere to meet extraordinarily high earnings targets, which entails the company containing or even lowering its labor costs by prevailing over workers in the strike. The company “will be looking to display strength as it nears its next earnings release, which is expected to be November 24, 2021,” financial analysts at Zacks Equity Research wrote Wednesday. “In that report, analysts expect [Deere] to post earnings of \$4.03 per share. This would mark year-over-year growth of 68.62%.”

For Deere’s full fiscal year, Zacks is estimating “earnings of \$18.91 per share and revenue of \$40 billion. These results would represent year-over-year changes of +117.61% and +27.9%, respectively.”

Financial markets have thus far given Deere a vote of confidence that it will be able to weather the strike. While the company’s share price has fallen somewhat relative to its record high in May, the stock has risen more than 2 percent over the last month and remains up nearly 30 percent since the beginning of the year.

The *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* spoke at length to a veteran Deere worker from the Des Moines, Iowa, area on Friday. The worker’s name is being withheld in order protect him against retaliation.

“There are a lot of angry people. You can see by the vote,” he said, referring to workers’ rejection of the UAW-backed agreement by 90 percent on October 10. “People are angry from the last two previous contracts. Especially the last one, when the union said it passed by just 200 votes.” In 2015, the UAW only released limited contract “highlights” at the meetings at which workers voted, allowing no time to seriously study the deal. Even still, there was widespread opposition to the agreement and many workers called for a recount of the ballots, which the UAW ignored.

The worker said that the UAW’s blackout on its talks with Deere was prompting growing dissatisfaction among his coworkers. “You can tell people are also nervous and upset, because they don’t hear anything about the negotiations or when they’re going to get paid strike pay.”

However, the worker stressed that Deere strikers were in a powerful position to emerge victorious. “We have a unique opportunity to win, because everything’s in our favor. We have a historical opportunity.

“Prior to the strike they had a very difficult time hiring people. To give you an example, they had hired over 100 people at one point at the plant. Out of

100-plus people they invited to orientation, about 30 showed up. Out of those 30, in the end they had about 13 left, then the 13 went down to a handful once they got to the floor.”

Increasingly nervous media commentaries confirm that Deere has been struggling to keep up with surging demand for its equipment. Like the auto industry, prices have increased significantly for both new and used farm machines.

NBC News reported this month that a used tractor price index at Ritchie Brothers, a global sales firm which sells heavy equipment, had risen 19 percent from 2020. Describing the surge in demand for equipment, the report stated, “The company’s website, where it hosts online auctions, has attracted more than 161 million visitors and 1.3 million bidders in 2021—that’s up by 15 percent and 19 percent respectively from the same time a year ago.”

The report cited the company’s chief marketing officer, who said, “As you get any type of disruption, especially from an [original equipment manufacturer] standpoint—like this strike—to an already stretched supply chain, you get quite a significant backlog. People are fighting vigorously for what’s left.”

While rising commodity prices and farm incomes have buoyed Deere’s profits—along with the concessions pushed through with the support of the UAW in previous contracts—this wealth has been squandered on the company’s executives and investors, with workers seeing their living standards perpetually erode.

“For them talking about great benefits, great wages, it’s just ridiculous,” the worker in Des Moines continued. “The things they brag about, they’re just lies. Most of these jobs are very difficult jobs. People call in all the time, because they can’t take it. They can’t get people to work for them. This is a fact, no one is making this up.

“Most of the buildings were built prior to World War II. During the summer, it’s horrible, it’s like someone pouring water on you you’re sweating so much. This is Iowa, so it’s also fricking cold in the winter. People are wearing sweaters and jackets working on the assembly lines.

“Another reason people don’t want to come and work for them is job security, they lay people off so much. Especially if the orders are low, then they lay

people off. In the last contract they introduced this seven-month probation. Because if these people become full time employees, then they have to be paid SUB pay [supplemental unemployment benefits].”

The worker said that Deere had struggled to hire even after abandoning many of its more restrictive screening practices. “They used to give a test, and you had to pass the test to get hired. Now they don’t do that anymore. I heard they’re so desperate they’re not doing drug tests, not excluding people with felonies.

“They simply cannot get people to come and work there. Why would you come and work where you have to sweat, in 120 degrees, for 20 bucks, when you can be working in an air-conditioned place for \$17, \$18 or \$19, and not working as hard?”

The worker voiced his support for the Deere Workers Rank-and-File Committee and the necessity of organizing independently of the UAW, which he said he believed would continue to be an obstacle to workers securing their demands.

“My only fear, and the only way I see we cannot win this, is if the UAW cheat us out of a good contract.” He continued, “I am pretty sure the UAW is going to do anything and everything to keep us from getting what we want, because if we win, it’s going to be like a domino effect, because a lot of people are watching this to see what’s going to happen.”

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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