Opposition high among Deere workers on eve of second UAW contract vote

Marcus Day
1 November 2021

With voting set to begin Tuesday morning and conclude later in the afternoon on a second tentative agreement (TA) between global farm equipment maker John Deere and the United Auto Workers union, opposition to the deal remains widespread among the 10,000 striking workers. The workers are fighting to reverse decades of eroding wages and deteriorating benefits and working conditions, and are in a powerful position with Deere making record profits and struggling to hire.

The UAW, however, is attempting to ram an agreement through which fails to meet workers' demands. The union only announced the deal Saturday and released five pages of selective contract "highlights" on Sunday, seeking to prevent workers from having time to carefully study the full terms of the contract before voting on it.

With many Deere workers bitterly recalling how the UAW forced through a sellout contract in 2015—releasing highlights hours before voting began—the latest attempt to force a vote without adequate time or information is provoking indignation, both among Deere workers and autoworkers who have suffered similar treachery by the UAW.

The most determined and organized opposition to the UAW's deal has come from the Deere Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which issued a statement Sunday evening denouncing the attempted blackmail by the UAW and the company. The statement called for the full release of the contract and a week to study it, and if the UAW refuses, the rejection of the agreement on principle. The rank-and-file committee also warned workers to be vigilant against any UAW attempts at ballot rigging and called for an expansion of the strike in order to win workers' demands.

While the UAW has sought to censor opposition on social media—with union locals disabling comments on most of their Facebook posts for weeks—workers have expressed their determination to reject the contract in Facebook groups or in individual posts.

"Hold the line" is a common refrain. Other workers questioned what was concealed in the full contract, not just the UAW's self-serving highlights. "A summary is the frosting, my question is what are they taking away from us," one worker in Iowa commented.

Many veteran workers noted that the large ratification bonus being dangled—which will be substantially eaten up by taxes and union dues, and which will only be provided to "eligible" workers—was intended to cover up the sub-par character of the deal.

A Deere worker from Waterloo, Iowa, denounced the TA and passionately argued for her fellow workers to reject it, writing, "Well my vote is NO! They can do WAY BETTER! We can't sell out for a higher damn bonus. [You] have to think about the percent that comes off the top, not to mention what our union gets!!!

"I'd rather make $5 or $10 more a damn hour, screw the bonus," the worker continued, "Sorry if I sound greedy but you know what we are the ones missing time with OUR loved ones, NOT THEM! My family deserves and our family deserves better! Pennies on a dollar, [that's] bullcrap! Dig deeper sir, this sister ain't taking the fancy wording and your chump change! I will continue to stand strong and united for the future generations!"

Workers who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* Monday also declared their opposition to the contract and determination to fight for more.

"I'm a NO. I think they can do better," a worker at Deere's Harvester Works in East Moline, Illinois, told the WSWS.

A worker at the company's parts distribution hub for North America in Milan, Illinois, said, "It's a no for me. They're trying to buy us with that $8,500 ratification bonus."

"I'm still voting NO tomorrow, no sell out contract!" a

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worker at the company's plant in Davenport, Iowa, said. "I can't vote yes for a contract that doesn't extend health care to retirees."

A worker at Deere's Waterloo operations told the WSWS, "For anyone that's going to be there for the next five years or more, we have no guarantee that our wages won't stagnate." He added that the harsh length of probation for newly hired workers—seven months—was still unacceptable.

The worker, as well as a number of others, told the WSWS that UAW officials were using scare tactics in order to coerce workers into voting for the deal. Arguing on behalf of the company, the UAW has said the deal is Deere's "last and final offer," and that a rejection of the agreement would only result in a drawn-out strike and a worse contract.

The Waterloo worker condemned the UAW's blackmail and starvation of workers on $275 a week in strike pay. "They're offering a huge sign-on bonus just to get people to come back after starving us out with a meager $275 a week, making people take this offer or else be screwed for Thanksgiving and Christmas. And the union basically is saying, 'Hey, you can't take another job if you make more money than the $275 a week.' It's BS.

"We could get more a lot more," he concluded. "And being that they will try to strip away a lot of stuff next contract, let's get all we can, while we can."

While there is widespread resistance to the UAW-Deere agreement among workers, Wall Street and financial markets signaled their approval of the contract's terms Monday. Investors drove Deere's stock up nearly 5 percent, with the stock up almost 6 percent at one point mid-day, closing at $358.75 a share, the highest since mid-September.

The extremely favorable response by Deere's large investors is a clear sign that they view the deal as a win for the company, not workers. It also expresses the confidence on Wall Street that the UAW—which has become ever-more integrated into corporate management over the last 40 years—is deploying all its resources in an effort to shut down the strike.

At the same time, there were nervous rumblings elsewhere in the financial press over what the Deere strike portends. In an article headlined "Deere's Labor Dispute Resurrects Talk of Inflation Adjustments," the *Wall Street Journal* wrote that surging costs in consumer goods, as well as a tight labor market, were already leading workers to press for far higher wage increases.

The article quoted Peter Orazem, an economics professor at Iowa State University, who said, "Inflation hasn't really entered the wage discussion for many years, and now it has to. Inflation expectations are starting to work their way into what people expect to be paid."

However, the *Journal* report also inadvertently provided further confirmation that Deere has ample resources to meet workers' demands. Noting that Deere's "labor costs have largely been held in check in recent years"—citing later the years-long "peaceful relationship" with the UAW—the article stated that a 10 percent rise in Deere's labor costs would only reduce the company's operating margin by 0.2 percentage points, according to estimates by investment advisory firm Jefferies Research Services LLC.

What Wall Street and the US financial aristocracy fear is that Deere workers will defy the contract, and that such a stand would spark an upsurge among hundreds of thousands and millions of workers who have suffered decades of eroding living standards.

The conditions are ripe for Deere workers to take a courageous step forward, to seize the initiative and mobilize support for their strike throughout the working class in the US and internationally. The WSWS urges all Deere workers to vote "no" to the UAW's second pro-corporate contract tomorrow and send a powerful signal that the era of low wages and givebacks is over. But for workers to place their strike on a serious footing—and prevent another betrayal by the UAW, which it will continue to attempt—a movement from below is required, organized in rank-and-file strike committees at every Deere factory and warehouse.

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.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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