

Striking Deere workers defeat second UAW-company agreement

Marcus Day
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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.

Striking workers at John Deere defeated a second United Auto Workers-backed tentative agreement on Tuesday, voting to reject it by 55 percent and defying the UAW's attempts to ram the contract through. Union officials released five pages of contract "highlights" only two days before the vote, hoping to stampede workers into accepting the deal before they could adequately study and discuss it.

Like the first UAW-backed contract, which Deere workers rejected on October 10 by 90 percent, the latest agreement failed to meet workers' demands for the restoration of retiree health benefits, raises large enough to make up for a quarter century of eroding wages, and substantial improvements to working conditions. Over 10,000 workers at the global agricultural and construction equipment giant are now set to enter the fourth week of their strike, the first in 35 years, on Thursday.

While the defeat of the contract is a courageous step forward by a significant section of industrial workers, it is more important than ever that control of the strike be wrested out of the hands of the corrupt UAW bureaucrats, who have been doing everything they can to secure Deere's wishes. There can be no doubt that UAW executives were holding emergency talks with their Deere counterparts on Wednesday and are continuing to plot with the company over how to overcome workers' resistance.

The experience of the strike at Volvo Trucks earlier this year provides the sharpest warning to Deere workers. There, the UAW responded to a third rejection of a concessionary agreement by running roughshod over workers' will and forcing them to re-vote on the deal they had just rejected, subsequently claiming ratification by a dubious margin of 17 votes.

For their struggle to be successful and workers to achieve their aims, the strike must find a new path forward. Rank-and-file strike committees should be quickly organized at every Deere facility, linking up with the Deere Workers Rank-and-File Committee, in order to break through the UAW information blackout and mobilize reinforcements for the strike throughout the auto and heavy equipment industries.

The UAW was clearly staggered by the defeat of its deal with Deere. In a terse statement announcing the results, the union's headquarters wrote, "By a vote of 45% yes to 55% no, UAW John Deere members voted down the agreement this evening. The strike against John Deere and Company will continue as we discuss next steps with the company. Pickets will continue and any updates will be provided through the local union."

For their part, Deere spokesmen wrote, "Today, John Deere employees at 12 facilities in Illinois, Iowa, and Kansas have rejected the second tentative agreement reached with the UAW. Employees at parts facilities in Denver and Atlanta have voted in support of a separate agreement with identical economic terms."

Threateningly, the statement continued, "John Deere will execute the next phase of our Customer Service Continuation Plan," i.e., Deere's strategy of deploying strikebreakers to maintain critical operations, particularly parts distribution.

The UAW spent much of Tuesday afternoon and evening keeping workers in the dark on individual plants' vote outcomes, with many union locals waiting six hours or longer after polls closed before announcing their results.

The largest local, Local 838 in Waterloo, Iowa, which has nearly 3,000 workers and has been a center of opposition to both the contracts this year and in 2015, did not release its results until after the overall outcome was announced, in an apparent effort to prevent momentum

building for an even larger no vote. Workers in Waterloo voted to reject the deal by 71 percent, which almost undoubtedly would have catalyzed even more opposition had it been revealed earlier in the day. Waterloo was also the site of explosive exchanges between workers and UAW officials at Tuesday morning's "informational" meeting, with the UAW cutting off the mic of a worker who was denouncing the union's attempted sellout.

Under conditions of a full court press by the UAW to secure passage of its deal with the company, workers at a number of other the plants nevertheless voted to reject the deal and press ahead for a real victory.

In addition to Waterloo, workers at another large plant, in Dubuque, Iowa, also rejected the contract by a high margin, 63 percent. Harvester Works in East Moline and the parts distribution center in Milan, Illinois voted "no" by 55 percent and 53 percent, respectively. The Des Moines Works plant narrowly approved the agreement, with 51 percent for and 49 percent against, while plants in Ottumwa and Davenport, Iowa voted to approve the deal by a little over 60 percent.

The UAW had deployed every lie and scare tactic it could muster in the run-up to the vote, telling workers that it was the best deal they would get, while dangling an \$8,500 signing bonus, which would be substantially eaten up by taxes and dues, as economic blackmail.

In the Quad Cities, the UAW scheduled ratification votes separately for the four different facilities in the area, in contrast the first contract vote, when it held combined ratification meetings at one convention center. The move was aimed at preventing workers from getting together and discussing the agreement and at shielding UAW officials from the collective ire of the workers.

UAW President Ray Curry—the lead architect of the sellout deal at Volvo—and Vice President Chuck Browning, head of the UAW's agricultural equipment department, had claimed that the contract met workers' "concerns and priorities" and contained major "economic gains," which the majority of workers demonstrated their disagreement with on Tuesday.

The contract rejection at Deere is the latest major repudiation by workers of the pro-corporate policies pursued by the UAW and other trade unions for over 40 years.

At least seven UAW-backed contracts have been rejected this year, four of them by 90 percent or more margins at Volvo, Deere and Dana, a global auto parts maker and Deere supplier.

A growing wave of rejections of union-backed contracts

has developed this year, including in mining (Warrior Met Coal in Alabama and the Inco nickel mines in Ontario, Canada), food production (Frito-Lay and Nabisco), health care (nurses in Massachusetts and Michigan), and building trades (carpenters in Seattle).

The rejections of the contracts reflect not just the immediate concerns and problems faced by different sections of workers, but, more profoundly, a developing movement in the working class, which is seeking to go on the offensive to reverse decades of corporate and union-enforced concessions and spiraling social inequality.

After the vote totals were announced, Deere workers conveyed a renewed sense of self-confidence and feeling of strength in comments to the *World Socialist Web Site*. A worker in Waterloo said he was "proud of the people who understand that we have the power on our side." A worker from the Davenport Works said, "Nothing is more powerful than workers united. We need to hold the line."

The Deere Workers Rank-and-File Committee played the central role in solidifying opposition to the latest UAW-company agreement, with its statement Sunday, "Reject UAW-Deere blackmail!," read and circulated by thousands of Deere workers.

A member of the Deere Workers Rank-and-File Committee who works at Des Moines Works said, "I am proud to be part of the group of people that dared to stand up to the corporate greed of John Deere and the betrayal of UAW leaders who keep selling out their members for corporate interests and their gains."

"But this fight wasn't and still isn't just about us," he continued. "At least not for me. This fight is more extensive. It is about the rights of all workers throughout the USA and around the world who are struggling to make it every day while corporations rake in billions of dollars year after year. It is about leading the way and making historical moments like this to show that we cannot be called essential and treated as expendable at the same time.

"United we stand, divided we fall. So, let's unite again and win this for all of us and those to come after us."

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