Deere declares “all options on the table” after workers defeat second UAW-backed contract

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After Tuesday’s defiant vote by John Deere workers to reject a second concessionary contract worked out with the United Auto Workers, Deere management is throwing down the gauntlet.

Following the rejection of the UAW’s first effort to push through a pro-company contract by 90 percent before the strike began October 14, over 10,000 Deere workers in the US resisted a campaign of lies and intimidation by the UAW and voted to reject a slightly modified version by a margin of 55-45 percent. A top executive at the giant agricultural and construction equipment maker said the contract rejected by the workers was its “best and final” offer and that it would redouble its efforts to force it through.

“In order for us to be competitive we have gone as far as we’re gonna go,” Marc Howze, Deere’s chief administrative officer, who heads labor relations, told Bloomberg. He added, “We’re not going back to the bargaining table. There is nothing else to bargain about.”

The company is using the language of war. Asked by reporters if it is planning to restart operations with strikebreakers, Howze, a former US Army major with a net worth of $20 million, declared, “All options are on the table.”

Deere is not bluffing. It is going forward with its “Customer Service Continuation Plan”—that is, its strikebreaking operation. It is also planning on utilizing its global operations to undermine the striking workers. Howze said the company was “considering sourcing replacement parts and machinery from its overseas plants,” the *Wall Street Journal* reported, with the Associated Press adding, “Other Deere plants globally are also working to pick up the slack.”

In response, workers must go on the offensive. Deere has a global strategy, and workers must also have a global strategy. This means mobilizing the collective strength of the working class in the US and internationally, including John Deere workers overseas.

The arrogance of the company is based on four decades in which its cost-cutting measures went unchallenged as it relied on the UAW to suppress the resistance of the working class. Deere and the entire ruling class, moreover, see the strike as not just a challenge from one set of workers. Any retreat, they fear, will send a signal to other workers and encourage the growing strike movement that is already underway.

The ruling class is facing an extremely unstable economic situation, which is exacerbated by the strike wave by workers who are fighting to restore past concessions and secure wage increases to counter the impact of rising food, fuel and other living expenses.

Deere—which counts on its corporate board current and former top executives at Royal Dutch Shell, Boeing, Cargill, Dupont, Verizon and the investment firm that handles the personal fortunes of billionaires Bill and Melinda Gates—speaks for the entire ruling class.

The revolt against the corporatist unions and growing strike wave threaten to reverse, as one financial analyst said, an “environment that has reigned” for nearly half a century, which “caused revenues to flow away from workers toward capital (i.e., investors).”

In a tweet earlier this week, former US Treasury secretary and White House economic adviser Lawrence Summers, who engineered the halving of newly hired workers’ wages during the Obama-Biden administration’s restructuring of the auto industry in 2009, denounced the restoration of cost-of-living adjustments (COLA) stolen from Deere workers in 2015. “Those serene about inflation should ponder the fact that the new John Deere contract has reinstated previously dropped cost-of-living allowances,” he wrote.

If wage growth does not simmer down as expected, Ian Shepherdson, chief economist at Pantheon Macroeconomics, warned in a note to investors, the

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Federal Reserve would have to start raising interest rates "as soon as June, and all asset prices would be under severe pressure." That is, the entire stock market bubble could burst.

The UAW and other unions have opposed any mobilization of broader sections of the working class to defend the Deere workers. On the contrary, UAW officials are conspiring with corporate management to force workers to accept the company's dictates.

The union officials, who are keeping workers on starvation rations of only $275 a week in strike benefits, hope they can follow the playbook used against nearly 3,000 Volvo Trucks workers earlier this year. After workers voted down three UAW-backed contracts, the first two by 90+ percent margins, the union forced workers in Virginia to vote again on the company's "last, best and final deal," and then claimed that it passed by 17 votes.

Deere workers are on guard against the sabotage by the UAW. They formed the Deere Workers Rank-and-File Committee to unite workers across all the company's operations, including internationally, and have demanded strike benefits to fully compensate for their lost income, the ending of backroom negotiations and the expansion of the strike.

The work of the rank-and-file committee must be expanded and every section of workers throughout the auto and auto parts industry united to overturn all the pro-company contracts imposed by the UAW over the last four decades.

The strike at Deere takes place in the context of an ongoing global pandemic that has exposed the utter criminality of the capitalist ruling elites. From the beginning, their chief concern was not the preservation of life but the protection of profit. After handing over trillions to the banks and corporations in the form of free money and the purchase of bad assets, the ruling class and its political representatives are determined to make the working class pay for it.

On picket lines, workers are denouncing corporations for cynically heaping praise on workers for risking their lives in infected workplaces and now intransigently opposing their demands for a living wage. "Heroes over hypocrites," said one sign carried by a striking nurse at Cabell Huntington Hospital in West Virginia.

The Deere strike takes place under conditions of a growing movement of the working class in the US and internationally. A partial list of ongoing strikes includes 800 teachers in Scranton, Pennsylvania, who walked out on Wednesday; 450 metal workers and 1,000 hospital workers in Huntington, West Virginia; 1,000 coal miners at Warrior Met in Alabama; nearly 6,000 graduate students at Columbia University; 1,900 nurses in Buffalo, New York; and 1,400 Kellogg's workers across the US. More than 30,000 Kaiser Permanente workers on the West Coast are scheduled to go on strike November 15.

Strikes internationally include public sector workers in New Brunswick, Canada; port and oil workers in Sri Lanka; doctors in Nigeria; and teachers in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Zimbabwe.

The UAW is doing everything it can to convince Deere workers that they are isolated. The truth is the opposite. Workers all over the world are eager to engage in battle against the corporations and banks, and a serious fight at Deere will galvanize enormous support.

To carry forward this strike requires the building of a national and worldwide network of rank-and-file organizations, the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). Deere workers cannot fight this battle alone.

The strike at Deere must be developed into a more generalized class movement, uniting every section of workers into a powerful industrial and political counter-offensive against the capitalist system, a system that sacrifices the lives and livelihoods of workers to the relentless drive for profit.

Workers in the US and around the world are not just fighting individual employers, but the entire capitalist system. This means the growing strike movement of the working class must be fused with a socialist program aimed at transforming giant corporations like Deere into public utilities and restructuring global economic life on the basis of a scientific and democratic plan to meet human needs, not corporate profit.

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