

John Deere strike at the crossroads

Jerry White**9 November 2021**

The nearly month-long strike by 10,100 John Deere workers in Iowa, Illinois and other states is at a critical turning point. In the week since workers voted down a second company proposal backed by the United Auto Workers union, Deere has gone on the offensive.

There are two alternative roads confronting workers. On the one hand, Deere and the UAW are dead set on getting a contract through that throttles workers' incomes and allows the company to continue to reap record profits. They will continue to conspire and use every weapon and dirty trick at their disposal to divide workers and crush their resistance.

But the path to the strike's victory exists and is this: Workers taking the initiative into their own hands, establishing rank-and-file organizations at every plant and warehouse, and appealing directly to autoworkers and Deere workers in the US and internationally to mobilize in support of their struggle, which has the potential to impact the fate of all workers.

The company has launched a media blitz, with top executives fanning out to tout their supposedly generous offer and suggesting its defeat by a 55-45 percent margin was largely due to a minority of unreasonable workers. With the UAW failing twice to push through its demands, Deere has sent text messages directly to workers in a naked effort to divide them and force a re-vote on the deal, which management insists is its "last, best and final" offer.

The walkout has caused serious delays in the shipment of replacement parts farmers need to keep their Deere equipment running during the last few weeks of the harvest season. After the contract was defeated, management announced it was stepping up its strikebreaking "customer service continuity plan," which includes deploying supervisors, engineers and other salaried workers to its facilities and ramping up production at factories outside the US.

While Deere officials publicly declare they still want an agreement to bring back the current workers, they have not ruled out hiring scabs to replace the strikers. "If we

walk through this and the information that's in front of folks, the deal that's in front of them, doesn't work for them, we have to figure out how we continue to serve our customers going forward," Cory Reed, president of Deere's Worldwide Agriculture & Turf Division, said in a *Des Moines Register* article published Monday. "That planning is always ongoing."

Far from mobilizing the union's 400,000 members to oppose these strikebreaking threats, the UAW is forcing the Deere workers to fight the multinational giant alone. After its second deal with the company was voted down, the UAW International issued a perfunctory three-sentence announcement, declaring it would resume meetings with Deere management—not the workers—to "discuss next steps."

The UAW has imposed a complete information blackout on Deere workers and has not even acknowledged any of its closed-door discussions with the Deere bosses. Meanwhile, it is continuing to keep Deere workers on starvation rations of \$275 a week in strike benefits despite a strike fund—paid for with workers' dues—valued at nearly \$800 million.

There is no doubt that UAW officials are plotting with corporate management to wear down the resistance of workers and force a re-vote on the same deal, or a slightly modified one that still fails to meet workers' demands.

With Deere expected to rake in nearly \$6 billion in profits this year—at least 62 percent more than its previous record in 2013—striking workers are determined to secure a \$10 an hour raise to offset more than 25 years of UAW-backed wage concessions and protect their families from the rising cost of fuel, food and other basic necessities. They also want to restore fully paid retiree health care benefits for every generation of workers, which the UAW gave up in 1997.

The UAW is determined not to win the strike, but to defeat it. UAW President Ray Curry, Vice President Chuck Browning and the rest of the affluent business executives at the UAW's "Solidarity House" headquarters know a victory for the Deere workers would

spark a far wider rank-and-file rebellion against the UAW. Workers at Caterpillar, Volvo and Mack Trucks, at GM, Ford and Stellantis, at auto parts suppliers Dana, Faurecia and Lear, and countless other locations all work under contracts with divisive tiered wage and benefit systems and other oppressive conditions, imposed by the same bribe-taking UAW officials through lies, threats of job losses and outright vote rigging.

The battle at Deere is part of what is developing into the largest strike wave in the US and internationally in generations. Since the beginning of the year, there have been more than 150 strikes in the US, involving workers from virtually every sector of the economy. Thousands—including Deere workers; Kellogg's workers; nurses and other health care workers in California, West Virginia and Massachusetts; Alabama coal miners; Scranton, Pennsylvania teachers and Columbia University grad students—are currently on strike. Another 30,000 Kaiser Permanente health care workers in California and Oregon are set to strike on November 15, and 60,000 film and production workers, who were ready to strike last month, are voting on a deeply despised sellout contract this weekend.

These are part of a growing wave of international struggles—including strikes by teachers, nurses and other public sector workers in Canada, Portugal, Sri Lanka, Mexico and other countries, as workers seek to combat the austerity measures capitalist governments are imposing to pay for massive corporate and bank bailouts.

The conditions are emerging for these struggles to be unified into a powerful industrial and political counteroffensive by the working class against decades of eroding living standards and the explosion of social inequality.

These militant struggles are being fueled by the response of capitalist governments all over the world to the pandemic, which has prioritized profit over lives. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the wealth of billionaires in the US alone has risen by 70 percent—from nearly \$3 trillion to over \$5 trillion—even as 89 million workers lost their jobs, 47 million people were infected with COVID-19 with unknown long-term consequences, and more than 776,000 died.

After being forced to risk their lives, workers all over the world are refusing to accept wages that fail to keep up with inflation, exhausting schedules that rob them of their family life and health, and the lies of company executives and union bureaucrats who say there is no money to meet their just demands.

In every struggle which is taking place or emerging, the biggest obstacles to workers' unification are the corporatist unions, which function as a labor police force and partners in the exploitation of the working class. That is why increasing numbers of workers, including educators, health care workers, Amazon workers, and auto and auto parts workers at Volvo Trucks, Dana, Deere and the Detroit automakers, are joining the growing network of rank-and-file factory and workplace committees, which reject the authority of the pro-company unions and fight for the independent interests of the working class.

On Saturday, workers at an online meeting sponsored by the *World Socialist Web Site* voted to establish the Deere Strike Rank-and-File Solidarity Committee to mobilize the broadest support for the striking workers.

To fight transnational corporations like Deere, workers need a global strategy. The striving of workers for international solidarity has been expressed by the Deere workers in Mannheim, Germany, who have repeatedly voiced their support for their brothers and sisters in the US. In May, the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) was founded to coordinate the growing struggles of the working class across all national borders.

The fight against capitalist exploitation is inseparable from a fight to eliminate the pandemic and end the sacrifice of human life for corporate profit. The growing wave of strikes and struggles across the world must be developed into a conscious political struggle to establish workers' power and reorganize economic life based on socialist planning and production for human need, not private profit.



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