

UAW claims Deere contract ratified in re-vote, following intense intimidation campaign

Marcus Day, Tom Hall
18 November 2021

The United Auto Workers union announced Wednesday evening that its contract re-vote at John Deere passed by a margin of 61 to 39 percent, in a sham election marred by widespread intimidation and legitimate fears of ballot-rigging.

In spite of the all-out efforts by the UAW, management and the corporate media to get the deal passed, there remained substantial hostility to the contract. Workers in Waterloo, Iowa, the center of opposition to each of the UAW-company agreements, defied concerted attempts by the union to break their resistance, rejecting the contract by a margin of 56 to 44 percent. Waterloo is the site of the largest local at Deere, with 3,000 workers out of the 10,000 nationwide.

The Deere workers have carried out a courageous struggle for five weeks, their first strike in 35 years. They twice defied the UAW and rejected its backroom deals with the company, the first time by 90 percent, widely viewing the proposals as grossly inadequate and insulting. With the company making record profits and experiencing a labor shortage, workers fought with a rediscovered determination and assertiveness, demanding major raises to make up for decades of wage stagnation, and the restoration of retiree health benefits and other concessions previously given up by the UAW.

Summing up the feelings of many, a worker at the parts distribution center in Milan, Illinois, told the WSWS, “They said we got everything we asked for. Far from it.”

Many others expressed their disgust with the UAW and the contract in comments on Facebook. “Here’s goodbye to all my free time, my weekends, my friends and loved ones,” a worker in Waterloo commented. Another pointed to the impact of the union starving workers on the picket lines with grossly inadequate strike pay, saying they were “positive it only passed since so many couldn’t live off \$275 a week let alone get another job to help make ends meet until they got a decent contract.”

A third Waterloo worker said simply: “We were sold out.”

Earlier in the evening, more information came to light

revealing the gangster methods employed by the UAW in its efforts to ram through the contract.

The elections chairman for Local 281 in Davenport, Iowa, Phil Gonterman, threatened to use his position as an inspector at the plant to retaliate against workers who vocally opposed the contract, in comments in a Facebook group shared with the WSWS by a worker.

“I hope any welder-machinist that talked big and bad about how they were voting it down based on their stupid hampster [sic] wheel brain understanding, doesn’t hate red,” Gonterman wrote after the UAW’s second agreement with Deere was defeated on November 2. “Because I’m going to f**k their lights out for every quality issue. Yeah, you all know who you are.”

In another vile comment, Local 281 Vice President Brian Ripple said he hoped Deere would shift work from its Waterloo, Iowa, plants to Mexico. Ripple’s statement came in reply to a post by Gonterman seeking to whip up reactionary nationalist divisions and scare workers with threats of outsourcing should the contract again be rejected. “Who’s coming to visit me in Mexico when I’m making Deere equipment in 3 years?” Gonterman wrote.

Ripple replied, “I’d say Waterloo might be a better candidate to ship out.”

Workers reported an overall atmosphere of intimidation and pressure in the lead-up to the vote, with union officials using scare tactics to convince workers that nothing more could be won and that another contract rejection would only lead to disaster.

No contract “ratified” under these conditions—if indeed a majority even actually voted for it—can be accepted as legitimate or legally binding. The very fact that the UAW forced workers to vote again on a deal they already rejected, together with threats of retaliation if they voted it down again, should make the agreement null and void.

Shortly after locals began to announce ratification, the UAW’s headquarters released a statement which had clearly been prepared well in advance. Even for the UAW, two of whose last four presidents are behind bars for embezzling

workers' dues, the statement set a new low for lying cynicism and hypocrisy.

"UAW John Deere members did not just unite themselves, they seemed to unite the nation in a struggle for fairness in the workplace. We could not be more proud of these UAW members and their families," stated UAW President Ray Curry, who was recently revealed to have been under investigation for accepting high-value gifts from a vendor.

"Our members' courageous willingness to strike in order to attain a better standard of living and a more secure retirement resulted in a groundbreaking contract and sets a new standard for workers not only within the UAW but throughout the country," said Chuck Browning, UAW vice president and director of its agricultural implement department.

Such brazen hypocrisy from these company hacks is not so much intended for consumption by workers, who widely despise the union executives and view them as criminals. Rather, they are intended for a pliant corporate media, which will now dutifully pick up and spin the narrative that the UAW apparatus had led the fight for "a better standard of living and a more secure retirement"—when the reality is that the pro-corporate union bureaucracy stood as the main obstacle to workers achieving their demands every step of the way.

Both Deere and the UAW have sought to carry out a divide-and-conquer strategy, attempting to pit workers at different plants, in different departments, or in different generations against each other.

In the first tentative agreement, Deere and the union tried to eliminate pensions for new hires, before backing off in the face of a near-unanimous "no" vote. In the "modifications" to the most recent deal, they touted relatively higher performance-based pay from the regressive CIPP incentive program, which will be dependent upon speedup and exhausting production goals.

At the same time, the UAW kept up a total information blackout throughout the year, telling workers nothing about what it was discussing with the company while censoring workers' comments on social media, in an attempt to keep the broad-based opposition out of sight and prevent workers from communicating with each other.

While the UAW and management will continue to try to foment divisions, workers have already begun to push back and appeal for unity. "I'm not happy but there is nothing gained by being angry and bashing the yes voters," a worker in Waterloo, Iowa, told the WSWS. "They voted their own conscience, and the UAW fed their fears and anxiety. I say we strive for a better outcome. We should continue to build the John Deere Workers Rank-and-File Committee."

The fight at Deere is far from over, as the company and UAW both will seek to enforce brutal levels of speedup and overtime in order to make up for lost production, sparking renewed resistance and struggles sooner rather than later.

The outcome, for now, of the entire undemocratic contract "bargaining" process underscores what the WSWS has repeatedly warned: The UAW bureaucracy, from the local level on up to the top, functions as paid enforcers for management, tasked with ramming through the company's terms and suppressing opposition among workers.

The necessary conclusions must be drawn.

First, workers must expand the John Deere Workers Rank-and-File Committee throughout every plant and warehouse, developing it as their fighting organization. Over the last month and a half, the committee played a critical role in solidifying the opposition to the UAW-company conspiracy, countering their propaganda and articulating a strategy to win workers' demands.

Second, the strike at Deere is only one battle in a broader offensive which is building up in the working class internationally. So far, the ruling class has relied on the trade unions to block or contain workers' struggles, preventing strikes at Kaiser Permanente, the TV and film industry, Dana Inc. and Amcor, or sabotaging them and ramming the corporations' demands through, as at Volvo, Deere, Frito-Lay, Nabisco and elsewhere.

But the unions' ability to suppress the class struggle is wearing out, and they are sitting on a social powder keg whose fuse has been lit.

For the next struggles which emerge to be successful, workers must assimilate the lessons of the experiences at John Deere and construct a new leadership linking workers across industries and in different countries, basing themselves on workers' needs and interests, not corporate profits.

Deere workers: Join the Deere Workers Rank-and-File Committee to carry forward the fight! Email deerewrfc@gmail.com, or text (484) 514-9797 to find out more about getting involved.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact