

The 2021 Deere strike: Lessons for the working class

Marcus Day

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On Wednesday evening, the United Auto Workers declared that its proposed contract with agricultural and heavy equipment maker John Deere was ratified by a margin of 61 percent to 39 percent, following a weeks-long propaganda and intimidation campaign by the UAW and management.

The UAW moved rapidly to shut down the strike, which saw 10,000 workers walk out on October 14 at plants and warehouses in Iowa and Illinois, as well as smaller facilities in Kansas, Georgia and Colorado. Shifts began resuming as early 10:30 p.m. Wednesday night at Deere's Ankeny plant near Des Moines, Iowa, less than three hours after the results were announced.

Throughout the five-week-long strike and even before, workers at Deere demonstrated enormous courage, resolve and willingness to sacrifice. Workers went into the battle to win back what the company and UAW had previously taken away. There was a growing sense that conditions have changed from even a few years ago, and that opportunities have opened up to reverse the decades-long decline in workers' living standards.

There was not only growing self-confidence, but growing consciousness of the international dimensions of the struggle. Workers increasingly expressed their recognition that the world was watching.

If Deere workers did not win their full demands—to get raises big enough to make up for years of wage stagnation, to restore retiree health benefits, to put an end to the rigged CIPP incentive pay scheme, and to secure major improvements to working hours and conditions—it is not because they were defeated by the company, but because they were betrayed by the UAW.

As in every contract vote and election run by the UAW, the accuracy of the results themselves should be viewed with a high degree of skepticism, given that one union official after another has been indicted and imprisoned for accepting corporate bribes or embezzling dues over the last four years, and that workers have repeatedly raised allegations of vote-rigging by union officials in earlier struggles.

But even if the ballot count is accurate, the contract would be no less illegitimate. From the very beginning, the union officials purporting to be the “representatives” of workers in fact operated as agents for the company. Lying to its members, censoring them, and threatening those who spoke out with retaliation, the UAW bureaucrats resembled nothing so much as the hired corporate thugs and strikebreaking mercenaries of the 1920s and 30s.

Insofar as the UAW has worked out a certain playbook for sabotaging workers' struggles—at GM and Mack Trucks in 2019, and at Volvo Trucks, Dana Inc., and Deere this year, to name but a few—it is critical that workers carefully study its tactics and strategy, in order to foresee and overcome them in the fights to come.

How the UAW sabotaged Deere workers' struggle

For months leading up to the expiration of the previous six-year contract with Deere on October 1, the UAW kept workers in the dark on its discussions with management over a new agreement, in what has become its standard operating procedure in every contract “negotiation.”

The 2015 contract itself was a sellout containing major concessions and quite possibly the product of ballot-rigging, with the UAW's lead “negotiator,” Vice President Norwood Jewell, later convicted of accepting bribes from Chrysler.

This year, the UAW once again carried out an information blackout on what it was discussing with Deere, what demands it was supposedly raising, or what it was planning.

The only exceptions to the UAW's blackout were clearly coordinated with Deere in advance. In mid-September, during strike authorization votes which were nearly unanimous, the UAW suddenly announced after weeks of official talks that Deere was seeking to end a plant closure moratorium, increase workers' share of health care premiums from zero to 20 percent, and end overtime pay for working over eight hours. As the WSWs wrote at the time, “The union is no doubt trying to soften the blow by putting out the worst possible contract first and working their way backwards.”

At the same time, the UAW told workers that ratification votes had already been scheduled for October 10, “if” an agreement with Deere was reached in time. In fact, the UAW already had an agreement, but it was just not telling workers.

The UAW's silence was then resumed up until the contract expiration deadline on midnight October 1. Within minutes after the deadline, it declared a two-week extension of the prior contract, provoking widespread outrage among workers, a torrent of angry comments on social media and calls for wildcat strike actions.

Significantly, workers at some plants stopped work at the midnight expiration, the *Des Moines Register* reported at the time, only to be ordered to continue production by union officials a few minutes later.

Following this massive backlash, the UAW would implement blanket censorship of the Facebook pages for UAW locals at Deere, almost universally disabling comments on posts in an attempt to keep workers from voicing their opposition and communicating with each other.

The first tentative agreement

Clearly taken aback by the level of anger and concerned that it might not be able to hold back workers much longer, the UAW moved quickly to announce a tentative agreement less than 24 hours later.

Given workers' massive rejection of the deal subsequently, it is worth citing the lies the UAW officials told at the time. UAW President Ray Curry said, “Our UAW John Deere national bargaining team worked

tirelessly to create substantial gains for members.” Vice president and head of the UAW’s agricultural equipment department, Chuck Browning, stated, “Substantial hard fought gains and protections were achieved due to the efforts of the UAW negotiators supported by the solidarity of our members.” And so on ad nauseum, with only minor variations in the adjectives (“substantial,” “significant,” etc.).

Knowing that it would be playing with fire if it attempted to give workers only its highly selective “highlights” as votes began, as it did in 2015, the UAW instead dumped the roughly 300 pages of contract language onto workers just two days before the vote.

The contract revealed what workers had suspected: The UAW was pushing yet another sellout agreement. Significantly, the deal sought to create yet another tier of workers, expanding on the divisions in wages and benefits first accepted by the union in 1997, after which pay for new hires was slashed in half. The deal would have eliminated pensions entirely for workers hired after October 2021. And with the company making record profits, the general wage increases—just 11-12 percent over six years—were viewed as insulting.

“This is what Deere comes back with?” a worker at one of Deere’s facilities in Illinois told the WSWS after the contract came out. “This is crazy, we deserve more. A \$3,500 signing bonus? Nobody wants that. More money, that’s what the hell we want. We should have been on strike last week.”

Workers sent the UAW’s deal with Deere down in flames, voting to reject it by 90 percent. The John Deere Workers Rank-and-File Committee, organized by workers following the announcement of the contract, issued a statement calling for its rejection and played a significant role in its defeat.

The UAW responded with a terse statement that a strike deadline was set for 11:59 p.m. on Wednesday, October 13. It would meet with the company over the next three days, again telling workers nothing about its discussions, while desperately seeking some pretext on which to call off the strike.

The UAW felt it had no choice but to allow the strike given the level of workers’ opposition. Once it began, however, the UAW set out to do everything it could to starve and isolate it, while strategizing with Deere behind closed doors over how best to force through a deal that would be acceptable to its shareholders.

As at Volvo Trucks earlier this year, the UAW kept workers on just \$275 a week in strike pay, which it did not begin distributing for nearly two weeks, despite retaining a strike fund of nearly \$800 million, made up of workers’ dues. Meanwhile, it did its best to keep its hundreds of thousands of other members in the auto and auto parts industries in the dark about the strike.

The case of Dana, a global auto parts maker and major Deere supplier, is particularly important in this regard: The UAW, along with the United Steelworkers union, kept approximately 3,500 Dana workers on the job on day-to-day contract extensions for the first week or two of the Deere strike, despite workers similarly voting to reject a union-backed sellout deal by 90 percent at the beginning of the month. Near the end of October, the UAW and USW used lies and threats to force through a rehashed version of the deal at Dana. Had the Dana workers struck at the same time as those at Deere, it would have enormously strengthened the position of both sections of workers.

The second tentative agreement

Within days of the deal at Dana being rammed through, the UAW announced another tentative agreement with Deere, on Saturday, October

30. The UAW scheduled the contract votes just four days later, on Tuesday, November 2.

This time, instead of releasing the full contract language, it distributed only five pages of “highlights,” seeking to stampede workers into accepting the deal. Again, the UAW claimed there were “enhanced economic gains,” and again, workers rejected these claims. “No insurance for retirees, no vote,” a worker from Deere’s Ottumwa, Iowa, plant said. “We want that and more money, not pencil games, to make up for 20 years’ lost wages and to keep up with inflation.”

The UAW’s campaign of scare tactics on behalf of the company was ratcheted up, with union officials again asserting, absurdly, that no more money was available, and that workers would lose support from the communities and be viewed as “greedy” if they did not accept the offer.

Nevertheless, workers again defied the UAW’s attempts to force its deal with the company through, rejecting it by 55 percent across the plants, and by a significantly higher margin of 71 in Waterloo, Iowa, which was the center of opposition and militancy throughout the struggle.

The company, losing patience with the fact that the UAW officials had not been able to secure passage of the deal as they had promised, responded to the second contract rejection with a media blitzkrieg. Its multimillionaire executives declared that there was “no more” to give, the offer had been its “best and final,” and that it was moving to the next phase of its contingency plan, i.e., strikebreaking operations.

At the same time, Deere made exaggerated claims of the “groundbreaking” character of the agreement, which still left workers behind, in real economic terms, where they had been before 1997. The UAW, coordinating the PR campaign with Deere, stayed silent as workers grew increasingly indignant over the company’s lies.

The “last, best and final offer”

After giving Deere a free hand for roughly 10 days to carry out its propaganda campaign and “explain the value” of the rejected offer to workers, the UAW announced on Friday, November 12, that the company had made its “last, best and final” offer, stating it contained only “modest modifications” to the agreement workers had rejected on November 2. These changes were to the regressive CIPP pay-for-performance system and would be tied to even greater production goals, meaning that the company would easily offset any marginally higher pay with ramped-up output.

The final attempt to ram the deal through—essentially a re-vote on the second contract workers had rejected—came at a key turning point for the strike, with support growing for workers in the US and internationally, and Deere and the UAW becoming increasingly desperate.

On the one hand, reports by Bloomberg and others indicated that the strike was having a significant impact on Deere’s operations, causing weeks-long delays to parts shipments, which usually arrived in just one to two days.

On the other hand, Deere workers internationally, including in Germany and France, as well as autoworkers in the US, were more and more backing the strike and calling for a joint struggle. A critical development in the organization and efforts to mobilize this support came with the founding of the Deere Strike Rank-and-File Solidarity Committee on November 6, bringing together Deere workers, auto and auto parts workers, educators, and other workers.

The UAW, for its part, faced a renewed eruption of its corruption scandal, with UAW President Ray Curry revealed to have been under investigation for accepting high-value gifts from a vendor, and a local secretary-treasurer, Timothy Edwards, indicted for embezzling \$2 million

in dues to spend on gambling.

The UAW was reprising its strikebreaking operations from Volvo earlier in the year, where it had also forced workers to re-vote on that company's supposed "last, best and final offer," falsely suggesting that it was legally required to do so.

The UAW carried out an all-out campaign to secure passage of the deal, serving as the messengers for Deere's threats that it would hire replacements and unilaterally impose its terms if the contract was again voted down.

In the most brazen and vicious example of its voter intimidation, UAW officials in Davenport, Iowa, openly threatened workers for opposing the contract. The Local 281 elections chair, Phil Gonterman, stated in Facebook comments that he would use his position as an inspector to make life difficult for those advocating against the contract. The local vice president, Brian Ripple, called for Waterloo's work to be outsourced to Mexico, since it was the most resistant to the UAW-company deal. No doubt these were only the tip of the iceberg of the UAW's gangster methods to strong-arm workers into accepting the deal.

Under such conditions, many of those workers who voted yes did so not because they supported the contract, but rather because they had no confidence that the UAW would pursue anything better. Others felt they had no choice but to return to work under the intensified economic pressure of the UAW's starvation strike pay before the Thanksgiving holiday.

Nevertheless, there remained significant opposition to the deal, with workers in Waterloo, the largest local, again voting against it, and workers at other plants also voicing their determination to continue the fight and press ahead to win workers' demands.

What lessons must be drawn?

The "ratification" of the contract resolves none of the burning issues confronting workers. For the UAW, it has been exacted at the price of even further destroying what very little remains of its credibility among workers.

"I woke up today pissed to come to work," a worker at the parts distribution center in Milan, Illinois, told the WSWS on the first day back. "How could we stand out there for two more weeks to get the same contract thrown at us? I just couldn't believe it."

"We were SOLD OUT," said a worker at Harvester Works in East Moline. "Things will never be the same. I'm ashamed of the UAW."

It has become something of a commonplace among workers that the UAW will force them to vote again and again on sellout contracts until the vote comes out the "right" way. The UAW's ritual invocations of the "democratic process" and that "the membership will decide" are a grotesque inversion of the reality. Workers are deprived of the most elementary rights in these so-called "unions," whether to information, to free speech, to freedom from abuse and harassment, or to have their democratic will be recognized.

The lack of democracy in the UAW and other unions is a reflection of the lack of democracy for workers under capitalist society as a whole. Under conditions of a further staggering growth of social inequality since the pandemic began, with a few hundred US billionaires growing their wealth by \$2 trillion, the maintenance of democratic rights is increasingly untenable.

While various bourgeois media pundits evermore hysterically and baselessly accuse US imperialism's rivals of "election interference," virtually nothing is ever said about the blatant voter intimidation campaigns repeatedly carried out by the UAW and other unions during

contract ratifications. This is because such actually existing "election interference" serves the interests of corporate America, which has relied on the trade unions to force through one sellout contract after another for 40 years.

What lessons must be drawn from the experience of the strike and its betrayal, not just by workers at Deere but everywhere?

1. There is an irreconcilable conflict between the union bureaucracies and the workers they claim to represent.

The UAW apparatus operates, from the misnamed "Solidarity House" headquarters down to the local level, as a labor police force for the corporations. The hundreds of upper-middle class executives and bureaucrats with six-figure salaries have only venomous hatred for the workers they claim to represent, as the comments by the Local 281 officials reveal.

The pro-corporate activities of the UAW are replicated throughout the AFL-CIO and other unions. Even as the UAW was working to betray the struggle at Deere, strikes of tens of thousands of workers were being blocked in the film and TV industry by the IATSE union, and at Kaiser Permanente by a coalition of health care unions.

The unions have worked to either prevent or shut down one strike after another this fall, in each case pushing contracts that failed to meet workers' demands for major improvements to wages, benefits and working conditions. Just as much as Wall Street and the political and corporate establishment, the union bureaucracies fear an uncontrollable eruption of workers' struggles should any individual strike win a decisive victory.

Contrary to the claims of the pseudo-left "union" cheerleaders such as *Labor Notes*, the Democratic Socialists of America, and *Jacobin* magazine, the UAW and other unions today are not workers organizations, but adjuncts of management, and businesses unto themselves.

The replacement of this or that official, or even a whole slate of executives, will not change that fact. It is determined by the material and social interests of these institutions, which are heavily invested in the stock market and benefit from the exploitation of their members.

2. The Deere Workers Rank-and-File Committee and other rank-and-file factory organizations must be expanded in the US and internationally.

The Deere Workers Rank-and-File Committee was the only organization among workers that consistently opposed the machinations of the UAW and Deere and fought to unite all workers. The committee gave a lead to the struggle, articulating workers' demands and elaborating a strategy to win the strike, by mobilizing workers in the US and internationally in its defense.

At a series of major fights this year—at Volvo, Dana, Deere, and elsewhere—workers have come into headlong conflict with the unions, and in response, have begun the difficult process of forming new organizations which are actually responsive to their interests.

At both Volvo and now Deere, the rank-and-file committees appealed directly to workers overseas for support. Such calls did not go unheeded. Volvo workers in Australia and Belgium voiced their solidarity for workers in the US—and in the latter case, walked out on their own wildcat strike. At Deere, workers in Germany and France stated the strong desire for a common struggle, strengthening and encouraging Deere workers in the US and undermining the efforts of the company and the UAW to pit workers against each other internationally.

This initial international solidarity revealed in embryo the possibility of rank-and-file committees uniting workers in a worldwide movement, which is absolutely necessary given the transnational character and global strategy of modern corporate giants such as Deere, Volvo and the automakers.

It is thus critical that rank-and-file committees be expanded in *advance*

of the next struggles, drawing in ever-broader sections of workers, forming communication networks within and across plants, linking up workers in different industries and in different countries.

3. The pandemic is fueling the growth of the class struggle.

The fight at Deere was not simply over a contract. More profoundly, it was driven by growing social anger over the relentless deterioration of workers' living standards for decades. These grievances have been enormously intensified by the ruling class' criminal policies in response to the pandemic, which have resulted in millions dead worldwide, and countless millions more threatened with potentially lifelong debilitation of their health.

While corporate communications departments have hailed workers as "essential," workers have been treated as expendable, forced to work in workplace death traps and sweatshops, on miserable wages and for endless hours.

The corporate media has begun to acknowledge this dynamic, reflecting growing concerns within the ruling class. As the *Washington Post* wrote in the days before the contract re-vote, "The gyrations that coronavirus caused in global commerce have upended not only supply and demand but workers' attitudes, causing many to question for the first time in decades what they're willing to tolerate."

4. A new political leadership in the working class must be built.

Workers at Deere found themselves in a struggle not just against a particularly ruthless company, but against an entire social and economic order—capitalism—which subordinates every question to the accumulation of private profit.

Both the Democrats and the Republicans represent the political interests of corporate giants such as Deere and Wall Street. In the course of the strike, Deere demonstrated once again that the courts and the state are instruments of the capitalist ruling class, easily securing a blatantly illegitimate injunction against pickets in Davenport.

For workers to defend and advance their interests, they must have a political leadership and party of their own. Throughout the strike, the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party sought to provide that leadership, arming workers with truthful information, exposing the lies of the UAW and Deere, and fighting for a program to unify workers internationally around their common interests.

We urge workers who agree with this perspective to make the decision to join the Socialist Equality Party today.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact