

Workers at Navy shipyards in Virginia and Mississippi reject pro-company contracts

Zac Thorton, Parker Thibodeaux
21 November 2021

Shipbuilders in Virginia and Mississippi are fighting pro-company contracts, the latest in a growing nationwide wave of rebellions against union sellouts. In Newport News, Virginia, 10,000 workers for Newport News Shipbuilding have overwhelmingly rejected a pro-company contract put forward by the United Steelworkers (USW), and in Pascagoula, Mississippi, the unions covering 7,000 workers at Ingalls Shipbuilding are forcing workers to revote on a four-year contract extension which they had earlier rejected. Newport News and Ingalls are subsidiaries of Huntington Ingalls Industries (HII), the largest military shipbuilding firm in the US.

On November 16, Newport News workers voted 1,312 to 684 to reject a proposed five-year contract that failed to meet workers' demands for improved wages and benefits, pensions and insurance costs. Despite the vote, the USW has refused to call a strike. Instead, the union announced an agreement with the company to extend the expired contract indefinitely, forcing workers to remain on the job, strengthening the hand of the company.

Turnout for the contract vote was low, a reflection of general disaffection with the union. However, opposition to the contract was indicated by the massive turnout to a meeting held on Nov. 20 by Local 8888, which was so large that the union had to conduct it outdoors, with workers filling up the parking lot and lining the street.

In a letter published on Facebook following the meeting, Local 8888 president Charles Spivey attempted to intimidate workers against striking, writing, "I've been through the dark days of a strike against the company. It wasn't pretty. It broke up marriages and split families."

A publicity stunt by the USW, in which the union

used a projector to beam the phrase "shipbuilders before shareholders," onto HII's corporate headquarters, was met with derision by workers. One worker wrote on the local's Facebook page, "So you let the company throw a little bonus money our way and you think that is a good contract? Just a way to shut us up for 5 more years." Another stated, "Stop with the bull**** Christmas lights and get to that table using our ideas for a good contract."

Less than 48 hours after the vote in Virginia, Ingalls Shipbuilding workers in Pascagoula, Mississippi resoundingly rejected a proposal to extend their current contract through March 8, 2026. The trade unions responded to this defeat by announcing that workers will be forced to vote again on the extension December 2. Union leaders refused to comment when asked by local ABC/CBS affiliate WLOX why the revote was necessary. However, the message was clear: anything less than a "yes" will not be permitted.

The contract has already been extended numerous times and is now at least a decade old. Under the previous four-year extension on the contract from 2017, workers received a paltry \$2,500 lump sum payment in March 2018, followed by a 65-cent raise for journeyman in March 2019, a 67-cent raise in March 2020, and an 82-cent raise in March 2021. All eligible employees also received a \$2,500 ratification bonus, payable on Dec. 14, 2017.

Under the new extension, journeymen would get only 70-cent wage increases over three years starting in 2023, a 2.5 percent increase. Their healthcare plans, premiums and retirement plans will see no change.

Under conditions where official inflation is currently 6.2 percent, this amounts to a massive annual pay cut. To cover for this, the contract extension seeks to bribe employees with a \$2,500 bonus, payable on December

16, and a second bonus in February 2022.

Among the 13 unions at the Pascagoula yard are the Pascagoula Metal Trades Council and the local chapters of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, International Association of Machinists, United Federation of Special Police and Security Officers, and Office and Professional Employees International Union.

The developments at Huntington Ingalls are only the latest in a string of betrayals by the trade unions across the United States, which are working to contain and suppress the growing drive by workers for better wages and working conditions. The proposed extension at Ingalls is only one of several agreements pushed by the unions that contain wage increases below the rate of inflation and even market rates. Wages in the private sector increased by 3.5 percent between June of 2020 and June of 2021, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

However, for American capitalism, far more is at stake at Huntington Ingalls than reining in demands for wage increases. The two facilities are vital strategic centers of America's military-industrial complex, which would be severely impacted by any disruption in work at the sites.

Located on Mississippi's Gulf Coast, Ingalls Shipbuilding is one of the largest employers in the state and one of the main shipbuilders for the United States Navy. According to its website, the shipyards are responsible for over 70 percent of the Navy's warships, including guided missile destroyers, Landing Platform Docks (LPDs) and Amphibious Assault Ships. Guided missile destroyers comprise the bulk of the Navy's surface combatants, while LPDs and Amphibious Assault ships are massive landing craft critical to the deployment of ground forces across the world. Amphibious Assault ships also carry helicopters and attack aircraft, making them aircraft carriers in all but name.

Newport News is the sole builder of US aircraft carriers as well as one of two sites which build the Navy's nuclear submarines. It is currently building the first two ships in the next-generation Ford class of nuclear-powered aircraft carriers, intended to replace the current Nimitz-class carriers as the Navy's capital ships, and which, upon completion, will be the largest warships ever built.

Huntington Ingalls has profited handsomely from the US military's buildup in preparation for a catastrophic war with China over Taiwan, having made \$9.361 billion in revenue last year. CEO and President C. Michael Petters also made a salary of \$8.6 million.

Over the course of the pandemic, a mood of opposition has also increasingly taken hold in the workforce at both sites. The Newport News shipyard was the site of a wildcat strike in April 2020 after Andrew Revell, a senior electrician, died of COVID-19. In its rush to produce more warships for the military, Huntington Ingalls also suspended its enforcement of the Biden administration's vaccine mandate for government contractors, risking new outbreaks in its workforce. In a letter to the workforce, Petters claimed that the decision had been made with the support of the Pentagon.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact