Labor Notes, DSA cover up UAW betrayal of Deere strike

Marcus Day
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In the week since the shutdown of the John Deere workers' strike, following an undemocratic contract re-vote marked by intense intimidation by United Auto Workers officials, pseudo-left and Democratic Party-aligned organizations are covering up for the UAW's betrayal.

Last Wednesday, the UAW declared Deere's "last, best and final offer" was ratified by a 61-39 percent margin, less than an hour after voting concluded. The contract was almost entirely unchanged from the second UAW-Deere tentative agreement that workers had voted to reject just two weeks earlier.

Despite the coordinated efforts of the UAW and Deere to bully workers into accepting the deal, there remained substantial opposition and determination to continue the strike, with the largest local in Waterloo, Iowa, again voting down the contract. Workers have since denounced the scare tactics employed by the UAW, labeling union officials as "criminal scumbags" who sold them out.

But the conflict between rank-and-file workers and the UAW is being swept under the rug and deliberately concealed by publications such as *Labor Notes* and organizations such as the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), which have long functioned as apologists for the union bureaucracies.

Thus far, the DSA and its leading publication, *Jacobin* magazine, have largely responded to the sellout of the strike with silence, the same approach they employed during the Volvo Trucks strike.

The DSA has left it to its member Jonah Furman, a *Labor Notes* staff writer, to begin crafting a false narrative that the UAW led the struggle to victory.

Responding to the UAW's claims of ratification last Wednesday, Furman hailed the outcome, writing on Twitter, "There it is. The Deere contract is ratified, and the strike is over. 10,000 UAW members turned down two contracts, killed a new tier, doubled their raises, improved pensions, won back COLA, and showed the country that you can still strike and win big. What a righteous fight."

In this and in subsequent tweets, Furman deliberately covered up how the UAW sabotaged the strike.

In the run-up to the vote, Deere, the corporate media and the UAW apparatus conducted an all-out propaganda to push through the deal. Multimillionaire company executives claimed there was no more money available to meet workers' demands for larger raises and the restoration of retiree health care, despite Deere making record profits, while they threatened to hire replacements and ramp up overseas production.

The corporate lackeys in the UAW bureaucracy dutifully repeated these lies and threats, combining them with their own outright gangster methods.

At UAW Local 281 in Davenport, Iowa, the UAW elections chair, Phil Gonterman—the person overseeing the balloting process—stated on Facebook that he would use his position as an inspector to retaliate against workers who opposed the deal, saying he would "f*ck their lights out on every quality issue." Local 281 Vice President Brian Ripple, meanwhile, suggested that the company shift production from Waterloo—the leading site of opposition to each of the contracts—to Mexico.

This intimidation campaign continued through Wednesday, with local officials haranguing workers at the voting site in Waterloo, aggressively pressing them to vote "yes." When workers pushed back, UAW officials contemptuously said their vote wouldn't matter anyway, raising serious questions about the possibility of ballot-rigging.

Throughout the five-week-long strike and before, the UAW worked to secure a deal as favorable as possible to management. It kept workers in the dark on its talks with the company, telling them nothing about what it was supposedly demanding. Union executives first tried to ram through a deal that would have eliminated pensions for new hires and established a new tier of workers, claiming the agreement had "significant gains."

After that first contract was voted down by 90 percent and the union officials felt they had no choice but to call a walkout, the UAW shifted to doing everything it could to isolate the strike and shut it down at the earliest opportunity. Despite a roughly $790 million strike fund made up of workers' dues, the UAW starved workers on just $275 a week in strike pay, placing them under immense financial pressure to accept a deal as the walkout wore on.

When the union brought back a second deal and sought to sell it with lies and claims that it was the best the company could do, workers again defied it, rejecting it by 55 percent. The UAW spent the next week and a half meeting in secret with the

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company to plot their "next steps," which would turn out to be their plan to force a re-vote on the company's "last, best and final" deal.

To the extent that workers achieved *any* modest improvements in wages and other benefits, inadequate as they were and falling short of their demands, it was in struggle against the UAW at every step. The Deere Workers Rank-and-File Committee, formed by workers in early October, emerged as the most organized opposition to the UAW-company contracts, calling for an expansion of the strike in the US and internationally to win workers' full demands.

Furman and other DSA leading members keep their mouths shut about this open conflict between rank-and-file workers and the UAW bureaucracy because it cuts across their efforts to promote the authority of the pro-corporate trade unions, and through them, the Democratic Party and capitalist system.

Furman himself is an experienced Democratic Party political operator, serving as the national labor organizer for Bernie Sanders' 2020 campaign for president, and later as the political and labor organizer for Democratic Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's 2020 reelection campaign. Furman was quickly elevated as a "labor expert" by the mainstream media during the Deere strike, given his connections and thoroughly conventional politics.

Furman sought to direct Deere workers into making fruitless appeals to Biden, a longtime servant of Wall Street and the US military and intelligence apparatus. In a video, Furman said, "Joe Biden is eager to be the most pro-union president in American history. Here is one important way Joe Biden can show up for labor, by getting involved in labor strikes on the side of workers."

Biden and the Democratic Party have dramatically escalated their promotion of the unions this year not because they defend workers' interests, but for the opposite reason. For over 40 years, the UAW and other unions more broadly have integrated themselves ever more deeply into corporate management and the capitalist state, suppressing strikes to unprecedented lows and forcing through one concession after another. In other words, the UAW was complicit in creating all of the issues—the low wages, deteriorating pensions and health care, endless speedup and overtime—that Deere workers were fighting.

But the political and corporate establishment are confronted with a problem: workers are again beginning to move, and the ability of the unions to hold them back is wearing thin.

Workers have rebelled against one union-backed pro-company contract after another this year, from to Warrior Met Coal to Volvo Trucks (where workers defeated three, and possibly four, UAW-endorsed deals), to the auto parts maker Dana, Frito-Lay and others.

Workers' distrust of the UAW has been accelerated by a years-long corruption scandal, which has sent two former union presidents to prison and revealed that other top officials embezzled dues money and accepted company bribes in exchange for signing sweetheart labor agreements. Alarmed by this growing alienation of workers from the union bureaucracy, *Labor Notes* and the DSA have pushed dead-end attempts to "reform" the unions, whether through the government-mandated UAW elections referendum or the installation of a new Teamsters president, Sean O'Brien, himself a thug who has threatened dissidents with violence.

There are two factors driving the pseudo-left groups to rally to the unions' defense:

First, both the unions and groups such as the DSA represent the interests of the upper-middle class, whose social interests are bound up with the continued inflation of the stock market, the exploitation of the working class, and the maintenance of capitalism. Not a few DSA members have used the union apparatus, with its six-figure incomes and innumerable privileges, as lucrative opportunities to get ahead. Similarly, up-and-coming union bureaucrats view the "left" credentials offered by DSA membership as a potentially useful cover for their pro-business policies.

Second, the DSA, as well as the Democratic Party establishment for which they serve as a key prop, fear the growing influence of socialism in the working class, above all the *World Socialist Web Site*, which has assisted workers in setting up rank-and-file organizations at Volvo, Dana and now Deere. The WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party have sought to encourage workers' independent initiative and organizing in each of these and other struggles, while exposing the company-union conspiracies and fighting to help workers form links and coordinate their efforts internationally.

As the class struggle continues to develop, it will not be as a revival of the business institutions falsely called "unions," as the DSA, Labor Notes and other pseudo-left groups claim, but rather in direct struggle against them, and against all those political tendencies who seek to maintain their dominance over the working class.

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