

“We’re not going to blindly follow union leadership”

Anger among Mississippi Ingalls shipbuilders on eve of contract extension vote

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Workers at the Huntington Ingalls Industries (HII) shipyard in Pascagoula, Mississippi will be voting today a four-year contract extension covering 7,000 union workers at the giant military shipbuilding facility on the Gulf Coast. There is widespread opposition among workers to the proposed extension, which is being pushed by the Pascagoula Metal Trades Council (PMTC) and other unions at the shipyard.

Workers have been forced to work under repeated contract extensions since 2007. That year they waged a 28-day strike against concession demands by the shipyard’s former owner Northrop Grumman, which spun off the shipbuilding division four years later. The current four-year deal is set to expire in March 2022 and, if extended, would keep workers under the sweetheart deal the 13 unions at the shipyard signed in 2017 until March 2026.

Workers are particularly angry because under the union-backed proposal they would not see an hourly pay raise until March 2023, when they would receive a meager 2.5 percent raise, or 70 cents. This would be followed by another 2.5 percent (72 cents) in 2024 and 3 percent (89 cents) in 2025. The company and the unions are dangling a signing bonus of \$2,500 this Christmas and another one in 2022 to entice workers to give up raises in base pay, which are used to calculate overtime, pensions and other benefits.

Assume the current annual inflation rate of 6.2 percent remains steady, the proposal would translate to more than a 15 percent cut in real wages over the life of the contract. Many workers travel long distances from Louisiana, Alabama and the Florida panhandle to work at the shipyard and rising gas prices have hit their wallets hard.

“The company sent out campaign literature over holidays telling us the supposed benefits of their offer,” an Ingalls worker told the WSW. “They’re dangling a \$2,500 signing bonus for Christmas over our heads, which would be \$1,400 after taxes. We want that on our checks, not in bonuses. Everything is going up and we need to keep up.

“The union leaders want this more than the members,” he said. “We haven’t had a new contract since 2007 and the current one includes all sorts of draconian language. Management is going

rogue, and reprimanding workers. They’re hiring a lot of young people. But it’s a testament to the workers that the signing bonus they’re offering is not working this time. If I’m gauging this right, the contract is going to be voted down. It’s DOA.”

Thursday’s vote is a do-over of a November 18 vote because of egregious irregularities by union officials. According to workers who contacted the WSW, when officials from the Boilermakers union emptied the wooden ballot box after the first vote it included not only ballots issued for the vote but additional ballots on different colored paper, which were reportedly from a previous ratification vote. Officials from the Metal Trades Council wanted to tally the vote anyway, but several lower-level union officials, aware that such blatant vote-rigging would trigger a rank-and-file rebellion, insisted the count be halted, and another vote scheduled.

A new vote was set for December 2 without any explanation to workers or the public. “That’s why the union leaders declined comment when asked by the local media to comment on the re-vote. The official vote count of that vote was never made public.

“It was counted off the record, to gauge the sentiment of the workers, but they never announced yeah or nay. An individual leaked that the contract was voted down almost by 2 to 1. About 1,200 workers voted, with over 700 against and little over 400 for it.”

The vote in Mississippi took place less than 48 hours after their fellow workers at HII’s Newport News, Virginia shipyard workers voted down a contract pushed by the United Steelworkers union by 1,312 to 684. 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, and dividing the Newport News workers from their brothers and sisters at the Pascagoula shipyard.

“The Newport News workers said ‘no’ and bucked the union. We’re not a monolithic group of workers, we’re not going to follow blindly the union leadership. Mike Crawley, the president of the Metal Trades Council is paid by the company. If you look up the company’s labor relations department, he’s right in there, part of the hierarchy.”

“Workers are feeling that the time is right for the rank and file to make historic moves. Workers have more leverage than we have ever had, since after the 1930s. The companies can’t keep workers. Even McDonald’s is offering \$700 bonuses to get

workers.

“Ingalls needs another 5,000 workers for all the contracts they got. The billionaires haven’t lost a penny during the pandemic, they’ve enriched themselves mightily. The pandemic has sealed the fate of the restaurants and mom-and-pop stores, but Walmart and the big companies have never had it so good. Bezos and Musk have made billions and the workers have been given the crumbs. Healthcare workers, steelworkers, Volvo, Deere, we all have a common goal and have to come together.

“If we get rid of the cultural wars that they use to divide us and think about the way more things that unite us, we can fight. The big corporations plant that among their workers. An ignorant workforce is gullible, an educated one dangerous, that’s why they rather keep us ignorant.”

In addition to the metal trades, the other unions at the shipyard include the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), International Association of Machinists (IAM), United Federation of Special Police and Security Officers (UFSPSO), and Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU).

Crawley has been president of the Pascagoula Metal Trades Council for at least 20 years. He oversaw the sellout of the 2007 strike, imposing deep concessions, including higher out-of-pocket healthcare expenses, and pushed through every contract extension since. In addition to his full salary at Ingalls, he also gets at least \$26,000 for his union position and will be joining his fellow bureaucrats at the upcoming Metal Trades Department Leadership Summit at Caesar’s Palace Hotel in Las Vegas, Nevada, on February 13-15, 2022.

Also pushing the contract is Warren Fairley, the president of the International Brotherhood of Boilermakers and a member of the AFL-CIO Executive Board. He took home a salary of \$346,468 last year, according to a filing with the US Labor Department.

By comparison, the “first class” workers at Ingalls make \$28.19 an hour, while helpers and apprentices make \$19-20 an hour at most, another worker reported. “We need a raise in the first year, but Crawley and Fairley said ‘no.’ This is the same deal from four years ago, but now inflation is 6.2 percent. If we take this, we’ll be going backwards. They were hoping the younger guy would jump at the \$2,500 bonus but they’re not going for it this time.”

Huntington Ingalls is the largest builder of US Navy ships in the US and has some \$47.8 billion worth of current contracts. With the company recording a half billion in profits in the first three quarters of 2021 and paying CEO Michael Petters \$8.6 million in compensation, workers are determined to win a new contract with substantial improvements in wages, benefits and working conditions.

Because the shipyards are critical for the war build-up against China and other countries, the government designated the workers as “essential” and has forced them throughout the pandemic to risk their lives and health. Even before the pandemic, the work was hard and dangerous. This was underscored by the tragic November 2 death of Randy Wade, a tank tester at Ingalls who suffered severe brain trauma and multiple facial fractures when he opened a pressurized tank on a ship under construction. Wade worked at the shipyard for 25 years and was retiring on November 24.

“The company is violating the Covid rules all the time,” the

worker continued. “The management says stay six feet apart but it’s impossible when you’re building ships. They’re in their offices staying safe and workers are getting sick.”

“The pandemic had a big impact on the workers here, but the company didn’t take it seriously,” another worker added. “If you got Covid like I did, you got paid for 10 days even if you were out for a month-and-a-half. They said we’re essential workers, we need sick leave, instead of being forced to use our vacation days.”

He said working conditions are oppressive in the shipyard. “The company is always rushing the sandblasting and there is poor ventilation for the welders. In the summertime it’s very hot, and the steel seems like its hotter and hotter. Back in the 1960s it was segregated, and black workers got the dirtiest jobs. My dad worked here for 35 years, and he died from asbestos after being exposed to it.

“There’s not a lot of good jobs out here. There’s Chevron and DuPont but that’s about it. Workers are coming here from four states: Florida, Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana. They come together in vans from New Orleans, Jackson and Pensacola. Some drive 200 miles or more back and forth from home. That’s three hours or more. On a weekday, they leave their house at two in the morning and by time they get home its four or five in the evening—just enough time to shower, get in bed and do it all over again.

“They’re hiring a lot of these kids and putting them on the deck plate without proper training. The supervisors write them up and it’s a revolving door here. The workforce is getting younger. They want to attack pensions. We don’t want to go backwards, we want to enhance what we got.”

Shipyard workers should reject the proposed contract extension and prepare joint strike action with workers at Newport News. To do this, they must take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands by joining the growing national and international network of rank-and-file committees whose aim is to unite all of the struggles of the working class to end the sacrifice of workers’ lives and livelihoods to corporate profit.



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