

“The same issues before seem worse now”

Deere workers describe problems in working conditions, pay following end of strike

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Nearly three weeks since the United Auto Workers (UAW) sabotaged the five-week John Deere strike by 10,000 workers in the United States, many Deere workers remain dissatisfied, describing ongoing issues with pay and unsafe working conditions.

As COVID cases surge across the United States—along with the new Omicron variant, which initial studies indicate may be more infectious and resistant to immunity—Deere and the UAW are taking no serious measures to stop the spread of the virus in the plants.

“COVID they could care less about,” a Deere worker in Waterloo, Iowa, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “I’ve been sick with no voice and coughing. My supervisor knows it, but will give me points if I’m not at work. Testing takes days to complete, and if it comes back negative, you get points for your time missed.”

He added, “A woman at work tested positive for it. She was supposed to be out for 10 days. They called her back and had her come back in at day seven. They made all people who weren’t vaccinated go home and get tested. But then they had someone unvaccinated go over to do her job. As long as they get their numbers, they don’t care.”

Asked about the overall conditions workers have confronted upon returning, he said, “It sucks! We still haven’t received a contract book. No word from the union on what they are doing for our CIPP [performance incentive pay] or when they’re sending chassis through without parts. They have tanked our CIPP plans and the only thing the union says is we just have to work through it. There’s no help from the union at all.”

Deere’s Continuous Improvement Pay Plan, CIPP, is

an incentive payment scheme that pays workers an extra amount if teams meet or exceed company-defined production goals. CIPP is used by Deere to force workers to work fast, deliver more machines and parts, and in the end, make more money for Deere.

“If we have to follow the contract, why doesn’t the company?” he asked. “So this 120 percent they have us on doesn’t mean anything when they just tank our CIPP, making us lose base pay, which in turn takes away the little raise they gave us. Our ratification bonus didn’t get put into our 401(k)s, so the company didn’t have to match our 401(k) contribution. It’s a complete mess with no help from the union.”

Another worker said the current cost-of-living adjustments (COLA) included as part of the new contract are far below the current inflation rate of 6.2 percent. “We’re getting a paltry 1.18 percent for COLA, which honestly is a slap in the face.”

He said large amounts were taken out of workers’ \$8,500 signing bonus. “We got screwed on the ratification bonus due to taxes, and the union took hundreds of dollars in ‘special union dues.’ They’re also not letting us do overtime, presumably as punishment for striking.”

Leading up to the final contract vote on November 17, which the UAW called Deere’s “last, best and final offer,” the union carried out a campaign of lies and intimidation to secure ratification. The contract, which the UAW said was ratified by a 61-39 percent margin, was virtually identical to the second UAW-Deere tentative agreement that workers had voted to reject just two weeks before.

Addressing the cynicism of the union’s attempt to portray the new contract as a great “gift” to Deere

workers, a Deere worker from East Moline, Illinois, said, “We are barely running, we haven’t even completed one machine yet. We have already had days off for part issues. We have had line speedups, jobs eliminated, and forced job changes. The same issues before seem worse now, in my opinion.”

While the UAW claimed that there was no more money “on the table” and the company had to remain competitive, Deere’s fourth-quarter financial report showed just how flush with cash they were. Deere’s profits more than doubled from 2020, reaching a record of nearly \$6 billion, and the company is projecting it will exceed its record by an even greater amount next year.

Meanwhile, Deere reported that it spent over \$3.5 billion in dividends and stock repurchases, again double the amount in 2020, giving more money to their super-wealthy investors and giant financial institutions.

An opinion piece published in Bloomberg News on November 24, “Deere Proves It Can Afford to Give Its Workers a Raise,” offered an unusual admission of this reality from the financial press, while stopping short of explicitly stating that Deere and the UAW were lying when they claimed the company could not pay more.

“It’s a good thing for Deere & Co. that the company was able to come to an agreement with its striking workforce before the agricultural equipment giant reported its latest earnings,” the author, Brooke Sutherland, wrote. “The update leaves no doubt that the company can afford to pay its employees a lot more,” adding that “workers thought they had room to push for more. It turns out they were right.”

Expressing the concerns among the Wall Street investors who comprise Bloomberg’s primary constituency, Sutherland pointed to the deep-seated grievances which will fester among workers, writing that “the feeling of being shortchanged isn’t one that’s easily forgotten.”

The experience of the John Deere strike provides further confirmation that the UAW, and the unions as a whole, function as instruments of corporate management. At every turn throughout the strike, the UAW worked to undermine it.

While the strike is over, the broader fight to improve workers’ living standards and secure safe and decent working conditions is not. It is necessary to continue build the John Deere Workers Rank-and-File

Committee and begin preparations for the struggles that lie ahead.

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.



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