

Union bureaucrats sell out Mississippi shipyard workers, force through contract extension

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Workers at the Huntington Ingalls Industries (HII) shipyard in Pascagoula, Mississippi voted last Thursday for the second time in less than a month on a union-backed four-year contract extension. Sources disclosed to the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) that workers voted down the extension by a two-to-one margin last month. The results, however, were never made public and a new vote was scheduled amid charges that union officials tried to rig the first vote to get it passed.

While members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) and two smaller unions voted “no,” the Metal Trades Department (MTD), an umbrella group of 10 craft unions including the Boilermakers said its members have ratified the deal, with 1,067 voting “yes” and 750 voting “no.” In a measurement of the deep alienation towards all the unions at the shipyard, barely a third of the 7,000 unionized workers cast ballots in the contract extension vote. For its part, the IBEW has until March 2022, when the contract expires, to come up with another proposal and bring it to a vote.

The extension for the contract, which dates back to 2007, does not include an hourly pay raise until March 2023, when workers would receive a 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 sought to manipulate the less experienced and more economically vulnerable workers with two signing bonuses of \$2,500, which would be taxed and adds nothing to their base pay.

Many workers travel long distances from Louisiana, Alabama and the Florida Panhandle to work at the shipyard and have been hit hard by rising fuel prices. Assuming 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, greatly eroding the workers’ living standards.

“I’ve talked with around 10 to 15 people about it and only one told me they want to vote yes,” one worker told the WSWS. “The one yes vote stated he needed the \$2,500 bonus in December to make it through the holidays, which is sad. People are pissed because they see inflation is up, wages are increasing around the nation and union leadership are walking through the yard telling everyone how wonderful this contract is because they’re not raising health premiums.”

The worker said that before the revote, the MTD and IBEW, working with management, ramped up their campaign to compel their

members to surrender to the company’s demands. The day before the vote, management personnel passed out flyer to MTD and IBEW members threatening workers with dire consequences if they rejected the contract. It stated that a “yes” vote was the only way to “avoid a 22% increase [in health care costs] over 4 years.” A “no” vote, the leaflet claimed, would mean that the legacy pension, health insurance, wage increase, and holidays would be “up for negotiation in 2022.”

“Ingalls has put on an all-out blitz to get this agreement ratified! They are extremely nervous about the outcome.” This “blitz” was coordinated with the unions in lockstep.

“I cannot vote because I got out of the Union a couple years ago as they never represented me when I needed them to,” another worker told the WSWS. “I cannot vote because of this, BUT I would not vote for this extension if I was able to vote.” Responding to the outcome of the vote, he said it is “super disappointing but it’s par for the course with these pseudo-unions. It’s common knowledge in the yard that the unions have Ingalls’ back.”

This sentiment was corroborated by a fourth worker, who said: “The [International Brotherhood of Boilermakers] and the Metal Trades Council are the main ones in the shipyard that are basically doing the company’s bidding. The Boilermakers is the largest vote out there, the largest union, and they pretty much do what the company says.” Commenting on the president of the Metal Trades Council, Mike Crawley, he said, “he goes right along with [the company] also.”

Officials from the boilermakers union reportedly cheered when the tally of the vote showed the contract extension had passed.

“We need a raise the first year” because of sky-high and persistent inflation, one worker told the WSWS. “Meat is going up, milk, gas, that’s all over the country.”

While corporate management and the unions constantly promote flag-waving patriotism at the shipyard, which builds warships for the US Navy, the multibillion-dollar defense contractor regularly sacrifices the health and lives of shipyard workers for corporate profit. On November 2, Randy Wade, a tank tester at Ingalls, died from injuries he suffered from opening a pressurized tank on a ship under construction. Wade worked at the shipyard for 25 years and was retiring on November 24.

Describing the conditions in the shipyard, one worker told the WSWS, “I would say on the newer ships, when we begin to build them, it’s fairly unsafe. There’s a lot of welding lines laying around, hoses on the ground. I would say a lot of safety issues, and you have a lot of new people out there.”

Commenting on working throughout the COVID-19 pandemic,

which according to official figures has claimed over ten thousand lives and infected over half a million people in Mississippi, the worker said, “There’s been COVID deaths, but I don’t know much about them. One gentleman, I don’t know his name...he was an older gentleman, he was about to retire, but he got COVID and passed away.”

“The unions have not been keeping track of infections and deaths and have not been informing the members of them. I think we should know all of that. I heard about the death [of the older gentleman] in the local news, but no news from the unions. All the workers should have access to this info as well. We definitely don’t operate like a union should operate.”

Hinting at how extensive the spread of the virus must be throughout the yard, the worker said: “We were wearing masks as much as we could, but not much anymore. It’s your choice [if you want to]. The masks [the company provides] are the regular face masks that you can buy at the Dollar Store. At one time they did give N95s out. I don’t know why, [but] it didn’t last long. I guess because there was a bunch of controversy on what they should wear at one point.”

He went on: “Quite a few of my coworkers got infected. At one point, when [the pandemic] first started, they were sending management home for 14 days, but they were wanting us to come back in five. They considered us ‘essential workers,’ [though] they never paid us like we were essential workers, anything extra or anything, but they kept the yard open. They had it where if you didn’t want to come to work you didn’t have to come to work, but you wouldn’t get paid if you didn’t come.”

Returning to the topic of the contract extension, the worker said: “I was always told you have to be a member of the union to vote, and that probably needs to change, but even the ones that are members, in their mind, it’s not going to do good for them to vote anyway because the company is going to get what they want. I hear that over and over again, ‘It isn’t going to do no good to vote.’ It’s already a done deal in their minds.”

Workers are intimately familiar with the reality that the union is a tool of corporate management, which always “leans towards and helps the company,” as one worker said.

“The corporate CEOs are making hundreds of thousands of dollars each. They pay the managers well, and I’m sure that’s part of the tactic to keep us separated.” Denouncing the arbitrary disunity of all the unionized workers at the shipyard, the worker concluded, “The IBEW stepped out of the contract talks and did their own thing.”

Last month, workers at Huntington Ingalls’ other major shipyard in Newport News, Virginia voted down a contract extension proposal from the United Steelworkers. Although the proposal was defeated by 1,312 to 684, the USW has blocked any strike action and kept workers on the job.

In a letter sent out to its members, the USW said, “Local 8888 is launching a multi-prong response to get the company back to the bargaining table, while preparing for the possibility of a strike if the company refuses to budge. First and foremost, we need ALL MEMBERS to be all-in on getting the company back to the bargaining table, whether you voted for or against the last contract offer. This is a test of will power and real power. ... Union leaders will share more details soon on the plan to mobilize members for a mass action before the shutdown next month. After all, shareholders can’t build ships, we do. Let’s show the company who’s really essential.”

The USW, which in recent months sold out Vale Inco nickel miners in Sudbury, Ontario as well as Dana auto parts throughout the US, will do nothing of the sort. Outside of the intervention of the WSWS to

inform union members at the Pascagoula shipyard of the exact same struggle being waged by their counterparts at Newport News, not a single effort has been made by the union bureaucrats within the USW, the IBEW (which, along with the Communications Workers of America sold out a historic struggle by Verizon workers in 2016), or the Pascagoula Metal Trades Council (PMTC) to do the same.

Underscoring the depthless duplicity of the union bureaucracy, the PMTC posted on their Facebook page on October 28: “It’s still Striketober, and people are taking notice. Gallup tells us that unions have the highest public favorability rating they’ve had in half a century. And yesterday, a poll conducted by Data for Progress asking respondents if they favored employees going on strike for better wages, benefits, and working conditions found that 74 percent of Americans, and even 60 percent of Republicans, approved.”

But PMTC, Boilermakers, IBEW and other unions have done everything to prevent the 7,000 Pascagoula workers from joining the strike wave. This is because the two shipyards are vital strategic centers of America’s military-industrial complex, which would be severely impacted by any work disruptions at the sites.

In comments delivered in between the two votes at the Pascagoula shipyard, Ingalls President Kari Wilkinson, in handing the keys for another warship over to the Pentagon, said that not only have the workers “completed another major program milestone, but they have done so in the face of a pandemic.”

The warship in question is an Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyer, Frank E. Petersen Jr. (DDG 121). HII’s website states that Arleigh Burke-class destroyers “are highly capable, multi-mission ships and can conduct a variety of operations, from peacetime presence and crisis management to sea control and power projection, all in support of the United States military strategy.” Highlighting how necessary these types of ships are for Washington’s war build-up against China and other countries, HII further states that, “Guided missile destroyers are capable of simultaneously fighting air, surface and subsurface battles. The ship contains myriad offensive and defensive weapons designed to support maritime defense needs well into the 21st century.”

Shipyard workers should reject the illegitimate 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 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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