

Unions ram through extension at Ingalls shipyard, stall for time at Newport News

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The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) and the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM) rammed through a sellout four-year contract extension at the Ingalls shipyard in Pascagoula, Mississippi on Thursday. Thursday's snap vote was the third in less than a month for a deal which contains wage increases well below the rate of inflation.

The extension, for a 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. By comparison, annual inflation soared to 6.8 percent last month with no signs of slowing down. 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.

The company and the unions also 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.

While the other unions at the Ingalls shipyard, which employs 7,000 people, had successfully rammed through the contract by a narrow margin in voting December 2, it was voted down by workers in the IBEW and IAM. While the IBEW had until March 2022 to negotiate before the expiration of the contract, they opted instead to call a snap vote on the exact same contract workers rejected last week, knowing full well that they are sitting on a powder keg of opposition and that delaying a confrontation would only encourage workers. In addition, voting again before the Christmas holiday would ramp up the economic pressure on workers by threatening them with the loss of their \$2,500 Christmas bonus.

The vote was apparently sprung on workers unexpectedly, as no public announcements were made prior to the third vote. The contract was passed by 373 members voting "yes" and 247 voting "no." IBEW Local 733 in Pascagoula has a total membership of 1,084, according to the Department of Labor, meaning the contract passed with a high level of abstention.

Workers were outraged over the union's maneuvering. "[The] IBEW is voting on the EXACT SAME CONTRACT that they voted down on December 2!" one worker told the WSW. "These union officials, talking about NOT having the rank-and-file's back!! They are just 'I don't care what you voted' corrupt!"

Another worker said, shortly before the vote: "IBEW and IAM vote this afternoon again on the same extension... They're hoping that people that voted no the first vote will now vote yes. There are no changes, everything is the same they are hoping the members who voted no will change their minds so they'll get the \$2,500 bonus before Christmas."

A third commented, "the unions look out for the company more than they do the members that pay their dues. I agree that they resorted to coercing members into voting for the contract which is NOT in the best interest of the workers."

"Shipbuilders work in a dirty, dangerous environment, and while it has improved greatly since when I started it's still a difficult living, compounded by a company that uses sneaky and underhanded tactics to get what they want from their workers. There is a lot of issues with line control and electrical hazards, and unsafe walkways and scaffolds. A lot of the ladders we use in maintenance to get on top of the cranes are aged and unsafe as well."

One worker had previously told the WSW that Huntington Ingalls Industries (HII), the parent company of the shipyard and the largest contractor building ships for the US Navy "considered us 'essential workers,' [but]

they never paid us like we were essential workers, anything extra or anything, but they kept the yard open” throughout the pandemic. Another worker said, “As far as any covid-related deaths, unless they were in your department,” neither the company nor the unions make announcements of them.

The re-vote was a worried, desperate maneuver which only exposes the pro-company character of the union. But they were particularly worried as well that if they did not pass the contract soon, it would play into the hands of workers pushing for a joint struggle with workers at HII’s larger shipyard in Newport News, Virginia, which produces nuclear-powered submarines and aircraft carriers for the Navy. Workers at Newport News Shipbuilding (NNS) are also locked in a battle for better wages and working conditions, having a rejected a union-backed contract last month.

An Ingalls worker said of the rejection at Newport News: “Good for them, I’m glad someone is taking a stand ... there should be a strike coordinated with Newport News.”

USW stalls for time in statement to Newport News workers

More than three weeks after the rejection of the previous tentative agreement for 10,000 NNS workers, United Steelworkers Local 8888, the sole bargaining agent at the shipyard, issued a vague statement Tuesday on the status of negotiations. The union has maintained a total information blackout on negotiations with the company, while seeking to discourage and intimidate workers pushing for strike action. In an earlier letter, Local 8888 president, Charles Spivey tried to scare workers by implying that a strike would inevitably be defeated: “I’ve been through the dark days of a strike against this company. It broke up marriages and split families.”

Tuesday’s statement began with demagogic attacks against HHI: “The Company resorted to this tired tactic because management is out of touch with the new shipbuilders in the yard.” But the union itself acted as its accomplice by presenting workers with a rotten deal, which it falsely hailed it as an improvement over the previous sellout agreement. This demonstrated that the union bureaucracy is more “out of touch” and hostile to

the rank-and-file than management.

The union continued its scare tactics over a strike, adding that workers are in for a “bruising fight ahead” with “economic hardship that comes with missing paychecks and scrambling to make ends meet.” But the USW has helped to impose such hardship around the country in one struggle after another.

Earlier this year, the USW sold out striking ATI steelworkers after forcing them to subsist on as low as \$150 per week in strike pay. The union’s total reported assets have grown substantially, from \$263 million in 2000 to over \$1.5 billion in 2020.

The union is also keeping auto parts workers at Dana Incorporated in the dark after workers at plants in Fort Wayne, Michigan and Louisville, Kentucky rejected a sellout agreement brought forward by the union. Rather than calling a strike, the union has forced workers to remain on the job indefinitely.

Regarding negotiations, the December 7 statement said that “no meetings are scheduled with the Company before the [Christmas holiday shutdown].” In other words, the union and management are biding them time to force through a sellout.

In concluding its statement, the union writes, “You can count on union negotiators and other leaders of this union to do everything possible to settle this dispute at the bargaining table BEFORE asking members to walk a picket line for a fair contract.” In other words, the USW is doing everything it can to prevent the strike which workers are demanding.

Shipyard workers at both facilities should reject these shabby maneuvers and establish contact with each other to prepare for joint action. 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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