USW keeps Newport News shipbuilders on the job as union prepares another sellout deal

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Weeks after workers at Newport News Shipbuilding (NNS) in Virginia voted by a 2-to-1 margin to reject a pro-company contract pushed by the United Steelworkers (USW), union officials are continuing their determined efforts to force through a repackaged version of the same deal. A union "rally" held on December 16, ostensibly to pressure the company to heed workers' demands, was used to counter growing demands by workers for strike action to win substantial improvements in wages and working conditions.

NNS, a subsidiary of Huntington Ingalls Industries, is the largest industrial employer in Virginia, with over 12,000 workers. The company is the sole producer of aircraft carriers for the United States Navy, as well as one of two providers of Navy submarines.

The "Essential Rally for a Fair Contract" was scheduled to make sure it did not disrupt any of the company's operations and to ensure the lowest turnout possible. Workers were expected to show up either before or after their shifts, and materials promoting the event were intentionally kept vague.

For one, the union's announcement for the event, which it published on Facebook on December 13, provided no clear indication as to when it would end, stating only that it would begin at 2:30 p.m. According to a worker on Facebook, the union had initially told them via a mass text that the event would conclude at 4:00 p.m. The union then revised this, telling workers on an individual basis that the event would go on indefinitely.

Requests for the union to announce the changes were ignored, with one worker commenting, "I had sent numerous messages to The Messenger for the Union and requested that they send another text to retract [the 4:00 p.m. start time]. I sent many texts today and still crickets…"

Another worker wrote, "Communication on all this stinks. The yard sent the letter out a few weeks ago," referring to the letter sent by the company to workers' residences after they rejected the contract proposal, "and this is the first I have heard the union respond about it. Bottom line is we are not essential, we are all replaceable."

A few hours before the event was set to begin, the union announced it "continues through 5 pm," meaning that the thousands of workers on second shift would not be able to participate. In addition, a worker commented that the company was not allowing workers to use their vacation time to attend.

The event began with a one-hour "protest," followed by a "solidarity program." According to a post on USW Local 8888's Facebook page after the event, the union's negotiating committee will begin meeting the first week of January, during which time it will "be working on a new economic package." Once complete, the union claims it will then present its contract proposal to the company. In fact, the union bureaucrats will spend the holiday shutdown and the first week of January colluding with management to figure out how to beat back the resistance of the rank and file and impose the company's dictates. To the extent any changes will be made to the agreement already rejected by the workers, these will be purely cosmetic and aimed at pitting one section of workers against another.

Revealing the integration and close collaboration of the trade unions with the capitalist government, the USW wrote that it held a series of Zoom meetings with staff members for "key Members of Congress" to "warn them about a possible strike." The USW has no intention of calling a strike. Its overtures to the various Democratic and Republican congressmen are aimed at proving the union's value in blocking a strike and

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making sure the Pentagon has ample weapons at its disposal to wage war.

NNS is a crucial component of the Biden administration's preparations for war against nuclear armed China and Russia. Last week, Congress overwhelmingly approved the largest military budget in history, nearly $770 billion. Of this, billions have been directed towards expanding shipbuilding infrastructure and production.

In the runup to Thursday's event, the union again sought to intimidate workers against striking. An announcement posted on Local 8888's Facebook page on December 10 warned workers to "prepare yourself and protect your family financially." This is a threat not against the company but against the workers. In every strike or lockout overseen by the USW, including at ATI, Asarco, ExxonMobil, Vale Inco and Huntington Alloys/Specialty Metals, the highly paid union bureaucrats have left workers isolated on the picket lines for months, while keeping them on starvation strike benefits even though the USW maintains a massive Strike and Defense Fund.

The union is doing everything it can to block a unified struggle between NNS workers and their brothers and sisters at Ingalls Shipbuilding in Pascagoula, Mississippi, who face a struggle against the same corporation. The Pascagoula workers are also facing a battle against the treachery of the unions, which forced them to revote on a contract they had previously rejected.

The "strategy" of the USW is a strategy of defeat. A strategy for victory can only come through the initiative of workers themselves and organization of rank-and-file committees, which are independent of the USW. These committees are critical to prepare coordinated strike action with the Pascagoula Ingalls workers. We urge NNS workers to join the growing network of such committees whose work is coordinated through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

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