

Shipbuilder in Newport News, Virginia, speaks out against USW-backed sellout agreement

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Are you a shipbuilder at Huntington Ingalls? Contact the WSWS to tell us what you think about the contract and the fight you face.

Voting is underway for a new five-year contract covering 9,700 shipbuilders at Newport News Shipbuilding (NNS) in Newport News, Virginia. The tentative agreement, negotiated by the United Steelworkers (USW) union, would include higher health care costs and wage increases far below the current inflation rate of 7.5 percent.

NNS, which produces aircraft carriers and submarines for the US Navy, is a subsidiary of the defense contractor Huntington Ingalls Industries (HII). The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke with a shipbuilder about conditions at the shipyard and the widespread opposition that exists among workers to the union-backed sellout agreement.

The worker, who wishes to remain anonymous for fear of reprisals from the union and the company, told the WSWS, “I’m a shipfitter. I’ve been working at the shipyard for about two and half years now. While I am a fitter, I mainly do lead insulation and plastic nuclear shielding.

“We have one of the most dangerous jobs in the country. A lot of times you will see people having to do things that maybe aren’t necessarily illegal, but one wrong move and that’s the end of you. That’s a quite real scenario for a lot of workers at the shipyard. There are a lot of precarious situations you can find yourself in and ultimately die.

“When you do your orientation, they want to emphasize safety. They want to talk about how safe we are, but multiple times I’ve been told I can’t sit down because they don’t pay me to sit down, or they can’t

move my job to a more comfortable position because they don’t have time, or it isn’t important enough to do that.”

When asked if there had been any deaths or accidents that resulted from conditions at the shipyard, he said, “The last death we heard which was attributed to the shipyard involved a supervisor who went down into a tank by himself, which you’re not supposed to do, and he wasn’t qualified to do what he was doing. He ended up trapped between some T-bars and was stuck there for eight hours. The shipyard blamed him for the accident and didn’t want to pay his life insurance, and I think [his family] is still battling that.

“We hear about people dying all the time. People have heart attacks. Nobody dies ‘in the shipyard’ though, because supposedly they don’t have anyone qualified to pronounce you dead, so you only die outside the yard.”

Describing the impact of COVID-19 and the role of the union, the worker stated, “I don’t think the union did enough to help us get the protections that we needed to stay safe against COVID, and they sure as hell didn’t make sure everybody got paid whenever they got COVID. I went out on COVID leave and I didn’t get paid, and I know plenty of people who have the same story. We were always told if we got it, we would be paid. The union said there’s nothing they can do.

“The only thing the union did was talk about getting us the ‘essential worker’ bonus. I never saw the union come and talk to us or give us letters about keeping us safe or making people satisfied with their working conditions. I heard nothing from the union when it came to COVID. They still haven’t given us an

‘essential worker’ bonus.

“I’m not aware [of the number of cases] off the top of my head. I know they say that they report cases, but personally my crew has had several situations where we were in close quarters with people who had COVID, and nobody said anything to us about isolating or anything. I know a guy who died, a supervisor, and half his crew didn’t even know he had COVID before he went out.”

On November 16, 2021, Ingalls shipbuilders overwhelmingly rejected an earlier contract proposal brought to a vote by the USW. Since then, the union has refused to call a strike, instead keeping workers on the job with indefinite contract extensions while systematically working to suppress opposition.

The USW’s efforts to block a walkout at Newport News mirrors what it is doing to 30,000 oil refinery workers, whom it has kept on the job with day-to-day contract extensions since February 1, despite overwhelming sentiment for a nationwide strike.

“When everything first started up and the first contract came out, all you could hear was everybody saying that the union is in the company’s pocket and the union is going to push that deal through no matter what,” the worker continued. “Fortunately, we struck down that first contract.

“Then the union comes out with a new contract, saying it’s the best one yet, and probably going to be the best one we’re going to get, but it’s pretty damn similar to the last contract we turned down. They’re touting in the union newsletter that we’re going to get \$22,000 in new money, but that’s only for pay grade 4. When you do the math, that’s only an extra \$91 a week, for a five-year contract.

“No matter how you look at it, whether you’re pay grade 4 or 17, over the next five years with the money that they’re giving us, inflation will have to be at nearly all-time lows for you to come out on top. Essentially you’re just taking a paycut for the next five years.”

The struggle at NNS is unfolding amid the reckless and homicidal war drive of the US and NATO against nuclear-armed Russia. Speaking to this, he commented, “Whenever I first started and President Trump was still in office, and all that stuff was going on with North Korea, we were on edge. We knew that the shipyard represented a prime target [for a military attack]. Now,

this isn’t like that. This is way more serious. You can feel it, people are talking about it every day.”

He added, “I haven’t heard anything from my supervisors, no one has talked to us about it. All they’ve said is that we’re safe from getting drafted.”

Speaking on the prospect of a joint strike among shipbuilders at NNS and Ingalls Shipbuilding in Pascagoula, Mississippi, the worker commented, “I have been saying for the past couple of weeks now, all it would take is about 5,000 people to walk out. PR would be so bad, the loss of production would be so bad. If you can manage to get workers in Mississippi and Virginia to unite to go on a strike, I think you would be amazed at how fast the company would try to give us a contract.”

The unification of the struggles of shipbuilders in Virginia and Mississippi—as well as oil workers, BNSF rail workers and other workers fighting against eroding wages and intolerable working conditions—is absolutely critical for workers to secure their needs. However, the chief obstacle to workers uniting their strength are the pro-corporate trade unions, which are working overtime to isolate these struggles and ram through agreements on the companies’ terms.

In order to carry out an effective fight, new organizations are necessary, rank-and-file committees, linking up workers across different workplaces, different industries and even different countries. In contrast to the unions, such committees will democratically formulate demands based on workers’ needs and interests, not what the company claims is affordable.

To contact the WSWS and discuss forming a rank-and-file committee, fill out the form below:



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