

Workers at Iowa defense contractor enter second week on strike

Marcus Day, James Tatsch
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Work at Eaton? Contact the WSWS to tell us what you think about the rejected contract proposal and the issues motivating your strike.

Over 360 workers at the Eaton-Cobham Mission Systems manufacturing facility in Davenport, Iowa, are entering their second week on strike Friday. The workers, members of International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM) Locals 388 and 1191, voted by a near-unanimous 98 percent to reject a tentative agreement between the company and the union on February 17, beginning their walkout shortly after midnight the following day. According to IAM officials, it is possibly the first-ever strike at the site.

The factory, which employs close to 850 union and nonunion workers, supplies the military and other aerospace companies with air-to-air refueling systems, fuel tanks and other specialized equipment. Cobham Mission Systems was purchased by Eaton, a multinational conglomerate with over 90,000 workers globally, just last year in a \$2.8 billion deal.

In a news release issued Saturday, a local IAM union official said workers voted down the three-year contract proposal "after management made a contract offer with sub-standard wages, reduced health care benefits and decreased 401(k) retirement matching contributions."

Kelly Jo Stoneburner, a worker with eight years at the plant, told the local *Quad-City Times* while on the picket line, "We are here because the cold out here isn't as cold as the contract we were offered. We are focused on health care, retirement and wages. And we are standing together because that's the way we change things."

In a statement shortly after the walkout began, the company wrote, "We are disappointed that the union has elected to strike rather than continue to work under

an extension and return to negotiations."

Eaton reported over \$19.8 billion in sales in 2021, up 10 percent from the previous year, while profits exceeded \$2 billion, increasing nearly 50 percent from 2020.

According to the IAM, the company has stated that it will not return to negotiations until March 1 or 2, in an apparent effort to wear down workers. Despite bitterly cold temperatures in the area in recent days, workers have been forced to go without burn barrels, tents or portable toilets, and police have reportedly removed workers' heaters from the picket line. The IAM has claimed that Davenport city ordinances prohibit such basic necessities, despite them being used on picket lines by John Deere workers last fall.

The strike at Eaton is the third to take place in the last six months in the Quad Cities, a once heavily industrialized region straddling Iowa and Illinois along the Mississippi River. It follows the KONE workers strike in September and, most significantly, the five-week strike by 10,000 John Deere workers in October and November.

In addition to its historic role as the center of the farm equipment industry, the Quad Cities is a major site of production for the military. The Rock Island Arsenal, located in the middle of the Mississippi River, has become the largest employer in the area, following decades of deindustrialization by Deere, International Harvester, Caterpillar, J.I. Case and other heavy equipment manufacturers which once dominated the local economy. The Arsenal, the US Army's only foundry and one of the largest government-run manufacturing hubs, makes "ordnance and equipment, including artillery, gun mounts, recoil mechanisms, small arms, aircraft weapons sub-systems, grenade launchers, weapons simulators, and a host of associated

components,” according to Wikipedia.

With US imperialism and its NATO allies on the war path against Russia, Eaton workers face the danger that immense pressure will be brought to bear to shut down their strike in the name of “national unity” and preparations for military conflict. Inevitably, this would entail workers continuing to see their living standards decline while Eaton and its large investors reap super-profits supplying the US war machine.

Such calculations are behind the aggressive efforts by the capitalist state to block strike action by 17,000 BNSF railroad workers. On Tuesday, a federal judge in Texas upheld a lower court injunction prohibiting strike action, work stoppages, “picketing, slowdowns, sickouts or other self-help.” Workers at the Berkshire Hathaway-owned railway had voted overwhelmingly to strike last month against the company’s unilateral imposition of a punitive points-based attendance policy, which is designed to squeeze even more productivity out of already overworked rail workers.

While workers at Eaton are looking to fight for their interests and have been encouraged by the courageous struggle at Deere last year, the IAM is undoubtedly looking to quickly reach an agreement on the company’s terms behind the workers’ backs, just as the UAW did in betraying the Deere strike.

The IAM has a long record of pushing through pro-corporate agreements just as treacherously as the UAW, isolating and sabotaging strikes most recently among Chicago mechanics last year and Bath Iron Works workers in Maine in 2020.

For Eaton workers to achieve their demands for substantially higher wages and improved health care and retirement, it is necessary to take the conduct of the strike into their own hands through the formation of a rank-and-file strike committee. Such a committee would provide a means to link up with other sections of workers engaged in struggle, including oil refinery workers and BNSF rail workers, as part of a common fight for good-paying jobs, decent working conditions, fully paid for health care and retirement, and other rights of the working class.

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