

CNH Industrial workers in Wisconsin, Iowa vote to strike, determined to win higher wages

Marcus Day
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Work at CNH? Tell us about the conditions at your workplace and what workers are fighting for. Comments will be published anonymously.

Workers at CNH Industrial plants in Racine, Wisconsin, and Burlington, Iowa, overwhelmingly voted to authorize a strike on April 10, determined to win back substantial concessions in wages, benefits and working conditions agreed to by the United Auto Workers (UAW) in previous contracts.

CNH Industrial is one of the world's largest agricultural and construction equipment makers, with over 37,000 employees globally producing the Case IH and New Holland brands. Another 34,000 are employed by Iveco, CNH's former commercial truck division, which it spun off at the beginning of the year.

The company's previous six-year contract with the UAW expires on April 30. Approximately 1,000 workers are covered by the agreement, including over 600 at the Racine factory and roughly 350 in Burlington. Workers in Racine voted to authorize a strike by 98.4 percent, while workers in Burlington voted by 97.4 percent.

The overwhelming strike votes and determination by CNH workers is part of a growing movement by workers internationally for higher wages in the face of surging inflation. Strikes and demonstrations have erupted in Sri Lanka, India, Nigeria, Sudan, Argentina, Peru and many other countries over spiraling prices for food and basic necessities.

"Basically we're fighting for more money, better benefits and vacation time," a veteran CNH worker in Burlington told the WSW. He said that workers are also fighting against the company's efforts to impose 12-hour straight-time shifts, grueling amounts of mandatory overtime and the elimination of seniority rights.

Workers at CNH had drawn inspiration from the courageous five-week-long strike at John Deere, he said. "It showed the rest of us people, the low-class workers, that it's time to reach for the sky."

The previous contract was a concessionary agreement

pushed through by the UAW in 2016 over substantial opposition, with 42 percent of workers voting to reject the deal. The contract maintained a hated wage and benefit tier structure, which the corporations and UAW have utilized for years to drive a wedge between newer and older workers at the Big Three automakers, Deere, Caterpillar and elsewhere. Workers hired before 2004 received only lump-sum payments and not base pay raises, while post-2004 hires received only 3-4 percent annual wage increases, largely eaten up by inflation. The contract also included increases to health care premiums and out-of-pocket costs.

Workers for CNH—as well as its predecessors, including CNH Global, J.I. Case, New Holland and International Harvester—have experienced decades of attacks on their jobs, wages and working conditions. A wave of consolidation and factory closures gripped the agricultural and heavy equipment industries beginning in the 1980s, part of an overall counteroffensive by the ruling class.

In Racine, where Case was founded nearly 180 years ago, the since closed Clausen Works plant employed as many 3,500 as recently as the 1970s, over five times today's figure. The Burlington plant, meanwhile, employed 2,000 workers a generation or two ago. Plants in many other cities were wiped out and have long since been razed to the ground, causing untold hardship for working class families.

The last strike at CNH took place nearly 20 years ago and was quickly betrayed and shut down by the UAW. In May 2004, workers walked out at plants in Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois and Minnesota over company demands for a new tiered wage structure with starting pay for new hires at only \$12 per hour instead of \$20 to \$22 per hour. Within hours of the start of the strike, the UAW ordered workers to return to their plants, but the company took the offensive and initiated a lockout which was to last 17 weeks.

Then-UAW Region 4 Director Dennis Williams—who is now serving jail time for his part in a massive UAW conspiracy to embezzle workers' dues—played an instrumental role in ramming through the contract workers had originally struck against. The late Fiat Chrysler CEO

Sergio Marchionne, who was implicated in the automaker's bribery of UAW officials to secure company-friendly agreements, also served as chairman of CNH Global. (CNH is owned in large part by the Agnelli family, the billionaire dynasty and founder of Italy's Fiat.)

As director of UAW Region 4, Williams oversaw the 2004-05 betrayal of workers at CNH Global (formerly Case New Holland), the world's largest agricultural and construction equipment maker, which was taken over by Fiat in 2013.

Workers at CNH are in no mood to accept further concessions from the company and the UAW, the worker in Burlington said. "The companies have another thing coming, they're about to have an eye opener. They think we're not going to strike, but we will."

While workers at CNH, Caterpillar and many other companies have drawn inspiration from the 2021 John Deere strike, they must also soberly examine the lessons of that critical experience. Workers twice rejected UAW-backed tentative agreements—the first time by 90 percent—which failed to meet their demands for major wage increases and the restoration of previous concessions imposed by the UAW, including health care for retirees.

In order to counter the information blackout and propaganda coordinated between Deere and the UAW, workers organized the Deere Workers Rank-and-File Committee. The committee fought back against the lies of the company and UAW and fought to expand the strike internationally, with Deere workers in Germany voicing their support for the struggle.

The UAW, however, did everything it could to isolate and sabotage the struggle, starving workers on just \$275 a week from its \$800 million strike fund, while union officials such as Chuck Browning, the union's head negotiator and director of the agricultural equipment department, and Ray Curry, UAW president, continued to draw their full, bloated salaries.

The UAW was only able to ram through a contract, which it admitted was virtually identical to the second one workers had voted to reject, on the basis of lies and widespread voter intimidation. Nonetheless, there remained substantial opposition to the deal, with 39 percent workers voting against it, and workers in Waterloo, Iowa, the largest local, again voting to reject the contract.

Workers at Deere who spoke to the WSWS about the struggle at CNH urged their brothers and sisters to stay united and be on guard against the UAW's pro-company maneuvering. "Look at our contract as a minimum," a worker in Ottumwa, Iowa, said. "Cutting out groups is not what equality is. Stay together, no in-fighting."

Referring to the UAW, a worker at Deere's Parts

Distribution Center in Milan, Illinois, said, "Well, for one thing they didn't support the John Deere strike. Don't let the UAW tell you how to vote. It all boils down to the workers. The union and company are not for you. Our contract is full of lies. Stay out on strike for everything you need."

A rebellion at CNH could reignite opposition at Deere, as well as at Caterpillar, Volvo Trucks and the Detroit Three automakers. But for workers to fight, they need organizations and a perspective which are resolutely wedded to the interests of workers, not the company.

The WSWS urges CNH workers to take the initiative now and form rank-and-file strike committees. Such committees should formulate demands based on what workers actually need, such as:

- An immediate end to the wage and benefit tier system, with all workers brought up to top pay;
- A 40 percent across-the-board wage increases to make up for years of pay freezes, and the implementation of a cost-of-living raise pegged to inflation;
- Fully funded, high-quality health care coverage;
- The restoration of the eight-hour day, with no loss of pay.

While the CNH and the UAW will claim the company cannot afford to provide workers what they need, the company has more than enough money, taking in over \$31 billion in sales and \$1.9 billion in profits in 2021.

Rank-and-file committees at CNH will provide the means for workers to link up with workers at Deere, Caterpillar and elsewhere, sharing information on their experiences, and laying the groundwork for a counteroffensive by workers in the US and internationally to secure their interests.

The WSWS will provide workers every assistance possible in forming rank-and-file committees. To get in touch with us about forming one or to ask a question, fill out the form below:



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