

Iowa CNH worker speaks out on eve of contract expiration: “We’re ready to walk out today”

Marcus Day
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Work at CNH? We want to hear from you: Tell us about the conditions at your workplace and what workers are fighting for. Comments will be published anonymously.

Agricultural and construction equipment workers at CNH Industrial, formerly known as Case New Holland, are gearing up for a major fight with the company. The current contract between CNH and the United Auto Workers union, covering roughly 1,000 workers in Racine, Wisconsin, and Burlington, Iowa, expires on April 30.

CNH is one of the largest heavy equipment producers in the world, with over 37,000 workers on five continents making tractors, combines, cotton pickers, coffee and sugar cane harvesters, as well as a variety of construction vehicles.

The WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* recently spoke with a veteran worker at CNH’s Burlington factory in southeastern Iowa. The plant manufactures backhoe loaders and rough terrain forklift trucks. The worker asked to remain anonymous to protect against retaliation.

Workers are itching for a fight after years of losses, he said. “The companies have another thing coming, they’re about to have an eye opener. They think we’re not going to strike, and we will.”

The UAW has been providing virtually no information about its talks with the company, the worker said. “No news. They just been saying they’ve been passing paper back and forth. That’s the rumor. We don’t know what’s going on.”

The worker said that the Burlington factory, first opened in 1937, has suffered decades of job cuts. “Employment at the plant is way down. It used to be

about 2,000 people. Now it’s maybe 390.

“Starting wage, you might be coming in at \$19 an hour. And they had to even bump that up, because they couldn’t get any help the last two to three years. We’re trying to get that back right now, get it up to at least \$26.

“Some of the things we’re trying to get back we lost a long time ago. We lost everything with the 2004 contract.”

In May 2004, the previous CNH-UAW contract expired, and workers overwhelmingly rejected a “final offer” from the company. However, the UAW waited nearly five months before finally calling a strike in November. After just 19 days, the company declared an impasse and said it would unilaterally impose many elements of its final offer.

The UAW bureaucracy responded by attempting an unconditional surrender, ordering a return to work on November 23, 2004. The company, however, took the offensive, locking out workers for 17 weeks, before eventually ramming through a deal with the UAW’s assistance which imposed a wage and benefit tier system, massively slashing pay for new hires.

“Our plant they push and push,” the worker continued. “Then they make a mistake. They don’t get parts ordered. When the part does come, they’re just slaving us with mandatory overtime.

“They want us to give up our seniority. Who thinks of that? And 12-hour days on straight time. And two hours of mandatory overtime. You think that I want to go to that? So you think I’m going to sign that contract?

“Why we’re really mad, we do a lot on our own. We do a lot with bad machines and still get products out. We do it with management against us all the time. As

for safety, you'd have to die for them to come out and fix something. And then they lie about their numbers. They do all kinds of things. So those are things that fueled us. We're done with that. When we do this, there's going to be management change."

Speaking about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, he said, "We've been sick, we've been through it. We had our little time when they considered us essential workers. They'd test us in the morning. That only lasted for about three days.

"Sometime I wish OSHA would surprise them or come on a rainy day and see all the leaks on the floors and electrical wires. It's bad. It's the ghetto. That management, it's worthless. That's how we all feel."

Asked about the UAW corruption scandal, which has sent over a dozen top union officials to prison for accepting bribes and embezzlement, the worker replied, "There's been a lot of that. Norwood Jewell did our contract in 2016. There was lots of little dirty stuff behind the scenes. They never thought about the new generation. And now we have the same guy who worked on the John Deere contract [UAW Vice President Chuck Browning, head of the UAW's agricultural equipment department]."

Former UAW Vice President Norwood Jewell, who also played a key role in ramming through concessions at Fiat Chrysler and John Deere in 2015, pleaded guilty in 2019 to charges related to his role in the multimillion-dollar bribery conspiracy between Chrysler and the UAW. Fiat Chrysler, one of the predecessors of global auto giant Stellantis, was found to have funneled illegal payments to union officials in order to secure company-friendly agreements.

The late Sergio Marchionne, implicated in the bribery scheme, served as both chairman of CNH and CEO of Fiat Chrysler. Two of Jewell's sons are still on the UAW's payroll, receiving annual compensation in excess of \$125,000 each as "servicing reps."

In 2016, Jewell and the UAW barely secured passage of yet another concessionary agreement at CNH, with 42 percent of workers voting against the deal. The six-year contract raised health care costs and froze pay for pre-2004 hires, while only increasing post-2004 hires' wages 3 to 4 percent.

Management and the UAW International continue to conspire behind workers' backs, the CNH worker said. "They're trying to pull ones over us. Like Deere, right

behind them. We want to get back what's rightfully ours.

"You got these CEOs making \$20 million a year, and they don't want to give us a little more money? They took in \$33 billion in sales in 2021. They were 28 percent over the market. It's just terrible. It's like that all over the world. But they got another thing coming. Karma's a mother."

Workers at CNH were immensely inspired by the five-week-long strike at John Deere last year, he said. "It showed the rest of us people, the low-class workers, that it's time to reach for the sky. John Deere is just about the mirror image, in terms of management and other things, of CNH and Caterpillar."

The worker said that solidarity and a common struggle by workers at CNH, Deere, Caterpillar in the US and in other countries was critical. "We're all in this together, all around the world. This is a change, this is a movement in the working class. Caterpillar's next. Us people in Racine and Burlington, we're not having it anymore. This is also for other workers, that's why we're fighting for a change here.

"I just know that we all got to stick together, just to break through corporate. We know that we're not going to let this get by anymore. That's why we're going to stick to our guns. We're ready to walk out today. So bring it on.

"This is going to be history, that's the way we feel. I want to get a touchdown. For the next people. I'm not begging, we're taking. It's not even that we're asking, we're saying you're going to give it to us."

The WSWS Autoworker Newsletter is assisting workers at CNH in forming rank-and-file factory committees independent of the UAW. These committees will allow workers to share information outside official channels, link up with workers at Deere and Caterpillar, and formulate demands based on what workers need, including the elimination of the tier system and major increases to wages and benefits. To talk with someone at the WSWS about organizing a committee, fill out the form below:



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