

CNH Industrial workers in Wisconsin, Iowa launch first strike in 18 years

Marcus Day
2 May 2022

Work at CNH? We want to hear from you: Tell us about the conditions at your plant and what workers are striking for. Workers' identities will be kept confidential.

At noon Central Time Monday, over 1,000 workers at CNH Industrial, a global agricultural and construction equipment maker, walked out at plants in Racine, Wisconsin, and Burlington, Iowa, seeking to win back past concessions in wages, benefits and workplace conditions. The strike is the first at the plants in nearly two decades and comes after the previous six-year contract between CNH and the United Auto Workers union expired on April 30.

The walkout by workers at CNH, known for its Case IH and New Holland brands, is the latest demonstration of the growth of working class struggle internationally. On every continent, increasing numbers of workers—including Caterpillar workers, oil workers, rail workers, nurses, teachers, garbage collectors, tea plantation workers and others—are launching strikes or demonstrations against the spiraling cost of living, low wages, unbearable working hours and the disastrous impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Speaking on the mood among workers shortly before the strike was announced, a CNH worker in Iowa told the WSWS, “We knew what needed to be done. We were all just fed up. People in our Facebook group were saying we’re ready to walk now, why are we still here overstocking for them?”

The company made clear its displeasure over the initiation of the strike, writing in a statement, “We recognize the union’s decision creates high anxiety among our represented employees in Burlington and Racine, as well as our other employees, our customers, and our community. We remain committed to reaching an agreement, and we are working to resolve this issue. We will continue to negotiate in good faith and trust that the union will do the same.”

As in the Deere strike last year, CNH workers are furious over the glaring contrast between their increasingly barebones income and the immense wealth hoarded by the company’s executives and investors.

Earnings have soared over the past five years at CNH, as has executive compensation. Meanwhile, the company has kept workers on the line throughout the pandemic producing profits, while repeatedly raising its prices and gouging farmers. From 2017 to 2021, the company’s net income increased from \$651 million to \$1.8 billion, a rise of 189 percent. CNH’s CEO compensation, meanwhile, grew from \$7.06 million to \$21.8 million over the same period, more than tripling.

While workers at CNH are determined to achieve major improvements and reverse years of declining living standards, the UAW bureaucracy is working with a well-worn strategy to isolate the struggle and impose the company’s terms.

To date, workers at CNH have been provided virtually no information about what either the UAW or the company are demanding in their supposed negotiations. Early Sunday morning, Local 180 in Racine announced an “hour-by-hour” extension of the previous contract and indicated a deal was near, stating, “We are close but we’re not there yet.”

On Monday, however, the UAW International wrote in a statement that it was calling a strike “after the company failed to present an agreement that met member demands and needs,” without spelling out precisely what it thinks those demands and needs are, or what the content of the company’s proposal was.

The statement, a boilerplate press release filled with cynical lies and distortions, cited UAW President Ray Curry in declaring “the almost one million UAW retirees and active members stand in solidarity with the striking workers at CNHi. ‘All UAW members are united with UAW CNHi workers,’ Curry said.”

The strike at CNH certainly has the enormous sympathy of workers who have heard about it at Deere, Caterpillar, the auto companies and elsewhere. But the last thing President Curry and the UAW want is an actual mass mobilization of workers in support of the strike.

The UAW's "isolate-and-conquer" strategy has been repeatedly deployed over the last year and a half. At strikes at Volvo Trucks and Deere last year, as well as a bitter contract struggle at auto parts maker Dana Inc., the UAW worked to keep its hundreds of thousands of members unaware of what was taking place, isolating the walkouts while starving workers on a measly \$275 a week in strike pay.

In each case, Volvo, Dana and Deere workers had rebelled against UAW-endorsed tentative agreements, voting them down by 90 percent margins. The UAW apparatus feared above all else that these initial rebellions among workers would serve as a catalyst, triggering an uprising among workers more broadly and disrupting the union's long-term incestuous relations with the corporations.

Describing the growing discontent among workers over the UAW's information blackout, the CNH worker in Iowa said, "People are pretty moody because nobody has been telling us anything. The UAW has been all hush-hush and secret about it. They keep us in the dark."

Whatever UAW officials may claim, there is no legitimate reason for the details of its talks between CNH and the UAW to be kept secret from rank-and-file workers. The information blackout is solely to the benefit of the company, not workers. As it stands, the workers are the only ones not privy to the discussions over a contract which could determine their pay and working conditions for more than half a decade, while CNH and UAW representatives are fully informed of what is being discussed.

In reality, the UAW bureaucracy is attempting to hide what it is discussing with the company because it is not engaged in "negotiations" between adversarial parties. Rather, the UAW is conducting conspiratorial talks with their corporate "partners," with the company laying out what it considers acceptable and demanding that the UAW find a way to ratify it.

Now that the strike has begun, it is more urgent than ever for workers to begin organizing independently.

Rank-and-file committees, composed of the most militant and trusted workers, should be initiated in Racine and Burlington. Such committees will provide a means to

share information and circumvent the news blackout imposed by the UAW and the company. No trust should be placed in any of the statements by UAW officials, who have shown time and again that they operate on behalf of management.

A central purpose of rank-and-file committees will be to draw up a list of non-negotiable demands based on what all workers require for a decent standard of living, such as the real elimination of the tier system, an immediate across-the-board 40 percent raise, the restoration of COLA and retiree health care, an end to endless mandatory overtime with no loss of pay, and more.

The CNH strike cannot be won so long as it is isolated to just Racine and Burlington. Workers should take the initiative and appeal to workers at non-union CNH factories to mobilize in support, as well as Deere, Caterpillar, the auto companies and other sections of the working class.

A worker at Deere's North American Parts Distribution Center in Milan, Illinois, expressed her strong solidarity with the strike, told the WSWS, "I hope they stay out longer than we did and get everything they are asking for."

Despite the claims in the corporate press and by the UAW, many workers at Deere remain deeply dissatisfied with the outcome of the strike, she said. "We didn't get a lot of what we asked for. CIPP [the Continuous Improvement Pay Plan, a pay-for-performance incentive scheme which encourages speed-up] is still not solved. We did get COLA back and insurance didn't change. But in reality we didn't get much at all."

Addressing herself to workers at CNH, she concluded, "Don't let the union, company and social media force you to sign. Make sure to read between the lines because they will say anything to get you to vote yes. They threatened us with hiring [replacements], but they still can't keep people. I hope they stay strong because in the end it's the workers who make the company run."

To speak with someone at the WSWS about organizing a rank-and-file committee, fill out the form below:



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