

“The working people are trying to stand up for themselves”

# Striking Iowa CNH worker speaks out, as UAW floats ending strike without a contract

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To join the CNH Workers Rank-and-File Committee, email [cnhrfc@gmail.com](mailto:cnhrfc@gmail.com), or text (262) 676-2381.

Roughly 1,200 workers at CNH Industrial in Wisconsin and Iowa are now in their third week on strike. The agricultural and construction equipment workers are seeking major improvements to wages, benefits and working conditions. They are part of a growing movement in the working class internationally that is being fueled by surging prices for basic necessities.

While workers at CNH are determined to fight for their livelihoods, the United Auto Workers union has been meeting behind closed doors with management to plot the isolation and sabotage of the strike.

The UAW is reportedly floating the possibility of suspending the strike before an agreement is reached, according to workers who recently attended a Local 180 meeting in Burlington, Iowa. “Our chairman said that might be a possibility,” a worker told the WSWS. “We don’t know if they’re going to do that for sure, but they were talking about that as an idea.”

A serious warning must be made: Any return to work without an agreement would signify an abject surrender pushed on workers by the UAW, opening the way for the company to enforce wages and working conditions even worse than those which presently exist.

Workers at CNH have already suffered the consequences of such blatant sabotage once before, which many older workers remember bitterly. In 2004, 19 days into a strike at CNH, the UAW ordered a return to work after the company declared an impasse in negotiations and said it would unilaterally impose its demands. Management, having been handed the initiative by union officials, responded by locking workers out for nearly four more months.

The struggle ended in March 2005, entirely on CNH’s terms, with brutal pay and benefit cuts for new hires. A key architect of this “strategy” was then-UAW Region 4 Director Dennis Williams, later union president, who is currently serving time behind bars for his role in a sprawling conspiracy to embezzle workers’ dues.

The conditions workers are now fighting against are the product of this earlier betrayal by the UAW, as well as subsequent ones in the contracts which followed.

There is no time to lose! Workers should begin organizing now to prevent any return to work without a contract which ensures certain minimum demands are met, including a \$10 raise, the restoration of COLA, a living wage for new hires, and more.

A genuine victory will be achieved not by shutting down the fight, but only through workers taking matters into their own hands and working to expand the strike. The CNH Workers Rank-and-File Committee, founded by workers earlier this month, has called for an end to the information blackout on negotiations, full income for striking workers out of the

UAW’s \$800 million strike fund, and the expansion of the walkout throughout CNH’s operations.

## CNH worker: “The corporations prey on us”

Reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke at length with a worker on strike at CNH in Burlington. With a population of approximately 25,000 along the Mississippi River, Burlington is one of a number of once-heavily industrialized towns in eastern Iowa. Cities such as Davenport, Dubuque, Waterloo, Cedar Rapids, Ottumwa and others developed as centers of production for farm and construction equipment and meatpacking, as well as forming major transit hubs on the railroads and the Mississippi River.

While this region, like much of the rest of the Midwest, has suffered brutal deindustrialization and eroding living standards since the 1980s, a growing mood of combativeness has emerged within the working class over the past year, expressed most prominently in the courageous five-week-long strike by 10,000 workers at John Deere in 2021. Following the struggle at Deere, strikes have broken out among the CNH workers in Burlington, aerospace workers at Eaton-Cobham Mission Systems in Davenport, and cement truck drivers in Cedar Rapids.

Most recently, anger has erupted among nearly 2,000 Arconic aluminum manufacturing workers in Riverdale, Iowa, over a contract with below-inflation raises being pushed by the United Steelworkers union, while a potential strike by BNSF rail workers over punitive attendance policies was only blocked by a reactionary federal court injunction.

The worker, who asked to remain anonymous to prevent retaliation, describes in the following comments the impact in his area of low wages, job cuts and factory closures, and unsafe working conditions during the pandemic, while also voicing workers’ growing recognition of the broader implications of their struggle.

“You got companies out here, like Borghi, workers are paid garbage there [Borghi is a manufacturer of pipes for the auto, agricultural and other industries],” the worker said.

“Borghi had an acid spill last month. And they still made their workers work in it, and their lungs were getting bad. So someone had to make an anonymous call to the West Burlington Fire Department, and they came out and shut them down. Corporations like that don’t care. They keep pushing their workers and having them make more. It’s just about profit. You got your investors and all these other people, like the railroad owners. Everybody has to have their cut, and that’s why they keep us on low wages.

“General Electric out here, they closed. I think they were owned by GE, then somebody else owned it and then it got bought by somebody else, I guess. The rumor was Burlington actually built a new road just for them. And then they got eff’ed. All of a sudden, it goes to another company and they just push all those people out. They don’t give a damn, and now here we are.

“Champion [a maker of spark plugs, now owned by Federal-Mogul Ignition/Tenneco] and Case [CNH] are about the only good jobs around here that really pay, unless you work in construction. It’s all low wages, and they just want to keep you down. You got good families in this town, but they just want to keep it low. They prey on us.”

**“They didn’t shut us down during the pandemic until they had a shortage of parts”**

“With the pandemic, they were telling us to wear our masks, but then you’d see management walking around without their masks.

“The nurses in the hospitals up here, they’re understaffed now too, and they treat them like garbage. It’s like they’re told, ‘Oh, you saved people’s lives, but go back to work, you’re not getting anything more, and if you make a mistake you’re gone.’”

“We have a Tyson plant up the road [in Columbus Junction], workers there they were getting sick, dying and they were still pushing them to work. All the loopholes the company got, calling them essential workers. That’s what we were called too. But I didn’t see a damn dime from it.

“They didn’t shut us down after the pandemic started until they had shortage on parts. And then they said they it was an ‘Act of God,’ and used that as a loophole to not give us our SUB pay [supplementary unemployment benefits], and our insurance wasn’t taken care of.

“And all of that was going on for months. Well it went to arbitration, and the workers affected ended up winning, but they still owe some guys money today, and the company is trying to use that as a bargaining chip. That’s how crooked this place is.”

**“Why should I trust the UAW, when your record has shown me not to?”**

“About a year ago, we were asking what’s going to happen on this contract with the coronavirus going on. And the UAW was like, ‘Well, it’s going to be hard to negotiate because of all this and all that.’ They were acting like it’s always bad for us. But, no, it’s really in our hands.

“I’m worried with whatever they bring back, they’ll try to split us up, to the point where it might be good for me but not the older ones, and then dangle an \$8,500 signing bonus. And it’ll be the same damn contract they tried to push the first time, but with a little different language.

“We’re in the dark. What are they trying to hide, if it’s not doing something sneaky? Why should I trust you, when your record has shown me not to?”

“Everybody has a feeling towards the UAW. Not towards the people on the ground, the working man and sister. It’s the ones at the top we don’t trust. It’s a good old boys club.

“They’re in cahoots, or these motherf---ers just don’t know what they’re doing, or a little bit of both. They’re like, ‘Oh, we’ll give you \$275 a week in strike pay, and insurance.’ That isn’t enough. It’s just us and Racine out, and they can’t handle paying us? They should be giving us what we usually make, or \$500, if we really wanted to have it be a

fight. That would go such a long way and give us longevity. I guarantee the company would be less happy we were on strike.

“There was one year on this last contract they made T-shirts, ‘If provoked, we will strike.’ I didn’t buy a damn thing. And now they’re leaving us here like slaves, you know? They think they’re gods.

“They were still sending out our local flyers with Dennis Williams or Gary Jones on the front, one of the ones that got arrested. It’s like the local didn’t want to say anything. And no one knew cause they were keeping us in the dark. What you guys reported, that stuff was true. You can’t beat the facts that are right there, or tell me what I’m seeing isn’t there. And it’s happening right now probably. I can’t trust anything these guys say.

“But now more people’s eyes are open. When you look at Volvo and John Deere, and everything they went through, and how stuff was pushed on them by the UAW, a lot of people saw that. And now it’s really coming out because it’s important to people.”

**“This strike is about more than just our job, this is about capitalism”**

“What’s being done with this rank-and-file committee, I definitely would like to do that. So we can actually put it out there, what we want, and they know that we’re not just sitting back. If we sit back and say, ‘Man, I hope they get it right,’ who knows what the UAW and the company are really saying in there? It’s like no, we will demand what we want and really be head. I’m ready for it.

“It is a movement. And that’s what we’ve been saying too, because when we saw John Deere, when they did what they did, it was like, yeah, we can do this too, you know? It’s time for it. There weren’t many strikes back in ‘04, when the last one happened here. It wasn’t until recently, like 2019, when they started really hitting the fire. And now it’s just happening all over.

“You got capitalism, and everybody wants to keep low wages down. It’s not just happening here in Burlington. It’s happening all over the world. Because if they can just keep doing this, man, everywhere around the world is going to be low wages. Poverty is going to be just so low, it’s going to be like Mad Max.

“The government’s always in on something, and it’s just terrible how evil it can be. I don’t really know much about politics and everything. But that’s just crazy how Ukraine is being used for a battlefield between the US and Russia. I always say the USA acts like bullies, going over to other places and trying to take s--- that doesn’t belong to us.

“And now we got another war. How many years have we been in war, for 30 years? And it’s like, damn, it’s about money, and the guns, and we’ve got to pay all the bills that come with that stuff. It’s just evil.

“Like I said, I don’t trust my UAW officials, top officials or the government, and I don’t care who’s the president. Shoot, you can’t even trust politicians around here. It’s always over some money, money, money. And what people would do for it.

“What we’re all working for is real change, not just for us, but for everybody. This strike is about more than just our job, this is about capitalism. And what this war really means, the high prices, it’s crazy, it all goes together. All over the world they want to keep us in capitalism and keep us going down. ‘Don’t stand up for your rights people, we’re going 50 years backwards.’

“They don’t want what we’re demanding to happen, because it would spread to the other CNH plants or even the autoworkers. The working people are trying to stand up for themselves, and they’re scared.”

*To join the CNH Workers Rank-and-File Committee, email [cnhrfc@gmail.com](mailto:cnhrfc@gmail.com), or text (262) 676-2381. To talk to someone at*

*the WSWS about joining or forming a committee at your workplace, fill out the form below:*



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