

Striking Wisconsin CNH workers speak from the picket line: “What I make is not a livable wage in this day and age”

James Martin, Jessica Goldstein
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As the strike of 1,200 CNH Industrial workers in Wisconsin and Iowa continues into its fourth week, workers on the picket lines outside the plant near Racine, Wisconsin remain determined to fight for significantly higher pay, health care benefits, pensions and vacation time.

The workers at CNH produce agricultural and construction equipment, including tractors that cost hundreds of thousands of dollars. In 2021, CNH made over \$7.5 billion in gross profits across its international operations, a nearly 60 percent increase over 2020.

A veteran CNH worker in Racine said, “I make \$22 an hour, but I fix tractors. I’ve worked here for 11 years. When they came to the table, they said our wages would go up a little bit. But then our insurance would be worse. Inflation is more than 8 percent. They said they’d give us a \$2 raise. And they can’t even give us a \$5 raise? And they got [scab] workers over there starting at \$35 an hour. And we’ve been there for a long time, and they can’t give us a \$5 raise?”

While CNH workers in Racine, Wisconsin, and Burlington, Iowa, are determined to fight for big increases in wages and benefits to keep up with the surge of gas and food prices, the United Auto Workers (UAW) has been working behind closed doors with management to keep the strike isolated and prepare a settlement which will fail to meet workers’ needs.

On Tuesday, both the company and the union released statements asserting that negotiations had stalled. CNH wrote that it had presented the UAW bargaining committee with a “comprehensive” and “final” offer on May 19, which it said UAW negotiators decided not to bring to a vote among workers. According to workers, the proposal included raises which would have failed to keep up with inflation, as well as being significantly eaten up by higher health care costs.

In a hypocritical statement issued in response, UAW Vice President Chuck Browning, head of the union’s Ford and Agricultural Implement departments, wrote that CNH was pursuing a strategy of “fear and intimidation,” seeking to “starve out UAW members” and “force an inadequate contract down our members’ throats.”

Each of these characterizations applies a hundredfold to the strategy pursued by the UAW itself, both in contract negotiations at CNH and at other companies.

The UAW has a well documented record of conspiring against workers in the auto and heavy equipment industries over decades, shoving brutal concession contracts down their throats, while top UAW bureaucrats accepted bribes from corporate executives and embezzled workers’ dues. Over the last year, the UAW has used “fear and intimidation” to ram through pro-company deals at Volvo Trucks and John Deere, in each case, forcing workers to re-vote on contracts they had already voted to reject. At the last vote at Deere, the UAW election committee chair at a Davenport,

Iowa, plant openly threatened to retaliate against workers advocating for a no vote.

As for CNH workers being starved out, this is made worse by the fact that they are receiving just a miserly \$275 a week in strike pay from the UAW’s giant \$800 million strike fund, while executives continue to draw their full six-figure salaries (in Browning’s case, over \$200,000 a year).

If the UAW declined to bring back the company’s demands to a vote, it can only mean that the UAW officialdom fears yet another overwhelming contract rejection and further discrediting itself. Workers have decisively voted down UAW-endorsed tentative agreements at least seven times over the last year at Volvo, Dana, Deere and Detroit Diesel.

A John Deere worker in the Milan parts distribution center expressed her support for the striking CNH workers, while warning that the UAW will work to bring back a company-friendly agreement. “They all need to get what they deserve. If the UAW tries to force them back to work, that right there tells you that the UAW is getting paid off. The UAW is crooked.”

As workers did at Volvo and John Deere last year, CNH workers have taken the critical initial steps in organizing independently, launching the CNH Workers Rank-and-File Committee earlier this month. The committee, which is calling for a \$10 raise and the restoration of COLA, among other demands, has outlined a strategy to break the back of CNH’s intransigence through the expansion of the strike and mobilization of reinforcements of workers throughout the auto industry.

“CNH expects too much work for what they’re paying”

CNH workers in Racine who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* over the weekend described the grueling conditions they face and expressed their determination to improve their living standards.

A veteran worker said, “I thought we do a lot of work for the price they pay us. I mean, if you’re making \$50 an hour, just about everybody would be hauling. But we’re not even close. You know? I tear a whole tractor apart when there’s a problem, and I put it back together for \$22 an hour. Nobody can do it. The dealerships can’t do it. I had five tractors under my name.

“Working conditions have not improved either,” he added. “You know, they expect too much work for what they’re paying. If you don’t work 12 hours, you don’t have any money in the bank. It used to be the guy who worked 40 hours, it would cover all the bills. Now you have the wife and the husband going to work 40 hours or more. Now you have to work 80 hours just to make it. And if you don’t work it, you don’t have anything

in the bank in case of an emergency. Everything breaks down, and we don't have the money."

He also spoke out on the impact of the strike on the company. "They were 100 people short before the strike started, and that's not even counting how many quit already. They don't want to put up with this crap.

"They're losing millions every day. Nothing's really built in there. You know, they can produce little things for other plants. There's not one tractor being built right now."

He also pointed to the leverage workers have in a tight labor market and are willing to fight. "We don't have enough workers for the work we do. So we have the upper hand; we can go anywhere we want to work. Because he can find the job tomorrow for \$18 an hour without difficulties."

At the same time, he added that the UAW has kept workers in the dark. "We filled out a survey a year ago to say what was important to us. But we don't really know what's going on with the negotiations. What was the counter offer? We don't know any of the details, even though we're paying dues."

"We're out here busting our butt. ... We should get paid \$35 an hour"

An assembly worker on the picket line said, "This is my first strike. I want a better cost of living. More money. Everything's going up. Gas is like \$4 or \$5 now. I was just telling others, if we get even a \$5 an hour increase, we still won't make it.

"I put the wiper motor on the assembly line. And then we run the wires through. I do a lot. I get paid \$20 an hour, and I've been here 14 years. I started at \$13 something. We're out here busting our butt. We should be getting paid what the scabs are getting paid—\$35 an hour. Everybody should get bonuses."

"We're the ones making the products. We should come together—union workers, non-union workers. We're all in this together."

"I'm in logistics here," said another worker on the picket line. "I make just over \$21 an hour. I started with a base of \$19.25. What I make is not a livable wage in this day and age.

"There are two [wage] tiers here at CNH," she added. "Obviously things could be better. I just deliver parts, and I'm hauling all day. It gets pretty strenuous. I definitely don't want 12-hour days.

"I don't get vacations either. A lot of companies I've worked for get vacation time either in the door or after your 90 days. And they tell me I've got to wait almost two years for a vacation?"

The rising cost of living was also on her list of concerns. "When I started here, it was \$3 in gas. Now it's like \$4.60. It costs me \$120 to fill up my truck every week.

"We're the ones making products. We should come together—union workers, non-union workers. We're all in this together. We're all in this together as far as inflation goes."

"You got the owners and everyone below that—We're the foot soldiers that deserve the credit"

"I'd like a better wage and vacation time," said a machinist on the line. "I mean they use up our vacation time right away in the first shutdowns. Who knows if there's a second shutdown. We should be able to use our vacation when we want to.

"Now, there's different positions that are more strenuous than others," he added on working conditions. "I don't like that. So at the position where I'm at now, we've got three rotating shifts. That's good for me. But on the other hand, if you're a machinist, and you're making smaller parts and not dealing with a heavy 1,000-pound part or more, they could last longer, you know, and it'd be great. But this doesn't make it fair."

"I want \$35-plus an hour," another worker said, in order to keep up with inflation. "That'd be nice and a pension as well for every worker. We don't have that right now. Inflation and gas prices affect us a great deal. Why is that going up? Like, they could just be using inflation as an excuse for price gouging, right?"

On supply chain disruptions and parts shortages, the worker pointed to the world economy and the impact of the pandemic, saying, "I think that just has to do with COVID and strikes around the world, with parts coming from different parts of the world as well as throughout the United States.

"Twenty years ago you couldn't fathom companies making billions," he added. "Now Coca-Cola makes billions. And CNH's profits are insane. You got the owners and everyone below that—we're the foot soldiers that deserve the credit, and they're feeding it to themselves."

"I'm fighting for better benefits, insurance and definitely a pension"

"I'm fighting for better benefits, insurance and definitely a pension," said another worker who has been at the plant a number of years. "With our age, they cut that short. We need to have a voice. We need at least a \$30 base wage. I'm second tier, and I make \$21 now. We've paid our dues and put in our time and our blood, sweat and tears."

He also spoke out against the rising cost of health care. "Honestly, the costs shouldn't increase every year.

"My generation also needs to fight for pensions. That's what my mom and my dad always had. My mom and dad retired from Chrysler. Blue collar work has been in my blood. We all should have a pension.

"I want a good retirement. I have three kids. Cost of living has skyrocketed. That's why I feel like we deserve \$30 an hour. Gas prices are going up. I pay almost \$100 to fill up my car every five days. Meat is completely ridiculous. I went from spending \$80 a week on groceries to \$150 a week. Wages and everything should go up because everything is going up. You need to get paid more to survive out here. It's harder just getting by. Who wants to live check to check? Some people can't even live check to check."

To join the CNH Workers Rank-and-File Committee, email 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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