CNH worker in Racine, Wisconsin, speaks out: “We need a much heavier strike”

James Martin
26 May 2022

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.

A CNH worker currently on strike in Racine, Wisconsin, recently spoke at length with the *World Socialist Web Site* about dangerous and degrading working conditions, substandard pay and benefits and the need for an independent strategy to oppose any concessions brought back by the United Auto Workers (UAW). Approximately 1,200 agricultural and construction equipment workers in Racine and Burlington, Iowa, have been on strike for four weeks.

Jim, whose name has been changed to protect him from retaliation, also pointed to the need for workers to join the CNH Workers Rank-and-File Committee, so that workers can share information and advance their own demands, including a $10 wage increase, the restoration of COLA [a cost-of-living allowance] and more. The following interview took place over several discussions and has been slightly edited for clarity.

WSWS: Tell us more about the strike and what the main issues are for you.

Jim: I’ll start with the former. Well, the reason why we are formally on strike is more about retirement and securing pensions. It’s more about COLA, and it’s more of a larger labor practices thing. Inflation has risen at a tremendous rate and, well, our wages have not risen.

The UAW would like us to talk about the other things first, but first and foremost, it is wages for us. We could go to McDonald’s, Walmart and make $1.50 an hour less. And this is not to disparage those workers. But with our somewhat skilled labor, we are not making on par with John Deere or Volvo or other manufacturers.

I do a job where I can lose an arm if I do something wrong, and I make less than $20 an hour.

WSWS: What is your job and the working conditions like?

Jim: I work on the transmission of the engines. They wheel them around through the factory on what is probably like half a mile of tread. And it just goes back and forth. And we use dollies and certain things to lift them up and put them on other tracks. I would wager we’re talking about steel that is probably four feet across and eight feet long of pure steel. I would guess those smaller units are probably 800 pounds at the bare minimum, and the larger ones could probably easily go up to 2,000 pounds. And if one of those runs over your foot, you’re not walking for a while.

I witnessed a man who got hurt. There was some speculation about exactly what happened because there’s a lot of gossip on the line. So this is speculative. But we know for sure that there was a man who got hurt.

Some people say it was a seizure; some people say it was a stroke. But regardless, he was not conscious. And I believe, while trying to grab onto some machinery, he may have hurt his arm. Within 20 minutes or so, he got dollied out of there and the management came back to the line and were like, “Get it right!” and they were extremely callous.

Management came along and got the line back running again, probably within like 20-30 minutes. And generally that’s their ethos.

And even when you’re getting hired, you’re told off the gate, if you miss any days within your first 120 days, you get fired. The HR (Human Resources) team did specify if there’s an emergency, there’s an emergency, but they essentially said in plain language, if you miss a day in your first 120 days, you’ll be fired.

There’s no wiggle room. If you’re a minute late, you can be let go for that. There is a very apparent lack of care for workers in general. And I think that reflects in [our] wages, and I think that reflects in our health insurance being exorbitantly expensive, with minimal coverage. I think that also reflects in the fact that we do not have retirement.

WSWS: Could you elaborate on what kind of retirement benefits you have?

Jim: We have no pension anymore like we used to. And they also stripped back the 401(K). I believe it used to be a match, and I don’t think it’s a match anymore. So, yeah, that’s us paying for our retirement.

That’s assuming that most of the workers can afford to invest in the first place, when you have people who are making just enough to cover housing.

One of my line workers frequently talks about after-tax income and what’s left over after paying child support. After paying child support and taxes, he barely has enough to cover rent, let alone food, let alone utilities, car and gas.

WSWS: How’s the rising cost of living impacting you?

Jim: If you’re going to consider costs of living, I think you have to consider hobbies and enjoyment outside of working 40 hours. If you cannot make enough in 40 hours to live a lifestyle within reason that you choose, you’re not really choosing. Some people may say, “Go get a better job,” but every job is essentially the same. Everywhere.

WSWS: How many hours do you work a week?

Jim: Typically, every single week they can make us work up to 54 hours. We work two Saturdays, and then one weekend off. We work Monday through Saturday 6:00 a.m. through 3:30 p.m.

In the lead-up to the strike we would go home early because of parts shortages. So they do not have to pay out overtime. So another reason why we are striking is to secure wage guarantees in case there aren’t parts. If you are sent home, let’s say one hour before you would have had your overtime mark, then you would still get paid or get paid for a minimum of 40, even if you only worked 36 or what not.

WSWS: What kinds of parts shortages are there?

Jim: So it can sometimes be waiting on certain types of specific screws, certain fittings that you have to put on the side of transmissions, certain tubes. Sometimes it’s like Brazilian dipsticks, because we send them to Brazil.

Sometimes I believe we do not have enough steel to make the top covers. And that’s a recurring problem that I noticed, due to just what I work with. And that means nothing can be done. But they’ll build on it anyways, and then we’ll have to disassemble it. It’s a further problem.

When it gets to your station and you start working on it, you have an

© World Socialist Web Site

“attack time,” which for us is 17 minutes, and you send it down after that 17 minutes. We are sending down units that have faulty axles or dummy axles, meaning we do not have actual axles, we are just putting something on there.

So we can work around the parts shortages. But they will still have to send them back. It’s been completely arbitrary at some points when we work, which is another reason why I don’t understand why we work 54 hours, when our line is down anywhere from three to five hours a day. And when the lines go down, you’re not working.

So everything’s shut down. You’re just standing in the spot. And you’re not allowed to use your phone, you just have to stand there. If you’re in your probationary period and you are caught on your phone, you’d be fired.

WSWS: How does that make you feel?

Jim: It feels like you’re completely disposable, which is a kind of double-edged sword in the middle of a labor crisis where they couldn’t even secure enough scab workers, so they had to fly them out! So it’s a weird feeling being constantly told by the establishment that you are 100 percent replaceable, but knowing that they cannot fill out a job you have.

WSWS: What’s the UAW’s role in all this?

Jim: I feel like the union in general could be much more aggressive. We’re talking about a pretty tight labor market. For a factory that employs several hundred people, they’re not going to be able to get turned around. They’re not able to adequately provide turnaround to replace several hundred workers on a dime.

I feel like we can be far more aggressive. But I know the history with the UAW taking bribes to end strikes and get more company-favorable deals. I’m not very optimistic about the union. But I do understand the need for a strike.

Right now it’s not a fight at all with the UAW leading it. The union rep talked about the negotiations a little last week, but what someone says and what they do can be completely different things.

We need a much heavier strike. The fact that only two out of 10 plants are on strike is not helpful. If it were an international strike, we’d force their hand very quickly. We need mass picketing to block entrances. We need a different strategy instead of playing ball.

We’re spread out between several locations at different times during the day instead of being a united workforce, and we’re kept in the dark about everything. I feel like that is very intentional. We need to be more aggressive about demands, because if you’re all together and all talking, it would have more cohesiveness.

WSWS: What was it like leading up to the strike?

Jim: We have 30 people on my line. There was a general sense the strike was going to start Friday before the contract expired. There was a push by the union not to strike then. But everyone knew there was something in the air. All of the higher-ups were walking around, which was unusual. Supervisors were all on the line all at once before midnight.

There are a lot of older workers, especially older ones who are pretty critical of the UAW. One of my line mates next to me, she told me about the fraud, bribes of the UAW. She was very angry at the union in general. While she was very positive about workers, she’s not very positive about the UAW. I don’t think she’s alone in that thought.

That’s the general ethos. She’s very direct. She was very aware of all of that. There’s a general vibe that we can be far more aggressive.

WSWS: CNH made over $7.5 billion in profits last year. What do you think of the claim by the company that there’s no more money?

Jim: Yeah, they made billions. Meanwhile, they tell us they have nothing. The cheapest tractor unit that my plant makes—the very cheapest one, if you get none of the bells and whistles—is $350,000.

There is a very massive profit margin on tractors; I would wager 20 percent is just pure profit. And that is much higher than a lot of other industries. And when you’re working with a much more expensive unit—so we have some units with everything modified, everything decked out, completely heavy-duty units. I believe those tractors are north of a million dollars, and I get paid $19 an hour to work on a million-dollar unit?

And CNH gave its shareholders $200 million or $300 million in buybacks? These are the sums they are spending on the richest shareholders.

I mean, it’s “hard work” sitting there collecting your returns. It’s *incredibly* difficult to be born into a rich family and be able to absolutely guess that a billion dollar company will still be worth a billion dollars the next year.

If I were to have a child, which me and my longtime partner would both like to have kids at some point, it would almost entirely bankrupt us, force us into exceeding credit debt, and likely force my partner to drop out of school, which would only drop the likelihood of financial stability tenfold.

The fact that having a child for most people my age is financial ruin is asinine. Our state and institutions have somehow come to an agreement that the literal continuation of our species is far less important than a fraction of a percent difference on the margins of profit.

The difference in utility between $4,492,000 over $4,484,000 each day from one plant at a singular global conglomerate is apparently greater than the creation of sophisticated life.

We need raises that cover inflation. I think the union has been intentionally very ineffective, dividing the workers and keeping us completely in the dark. Based on all of the prior contracts, I’m sure that we’re going to get this back and they’re going to say, “Look, beautiful deal!” They’ll give us a whole $3 an hour more.

But insurance is going to go up. I would not be surprised in the slightest. I wouldn’t be surprised if they got rid of the one weekend we have off. The UAW will bring concessions on workers, like at John Deere.

If you just look at CNH wages from 1977 and compare it to now, with inflation, we should be making $40 an hour, in today’s money. The capitalist class has done a brilliant job at marketing concessions as wins.

WSWS: How do you see the need for a rank-and-file committee?

Jim: Overall, worker consciousness is the only way to achieve a workers’ victory. It cannot be done through a company peddling with a so-called “union” to draw up a contract. If we were to actually garner a victory in terms of wages, in terms of overtime, in terms of retirement and health insurance, it would have to be done through the workers and not through the union hierarchy.

I believe we need a rank-and-file committee separate from the UAW. Even if the UAW is also operating, a committee could, at the very least, be a counterbalance. Because right now we cannot communicate at all with each other. There is no way for me to reach out to my fellow workers and be like, personally, I believe if we get anything less than $30 an hour, we should vote it down sharply!

There is no way for me to do that with how we’ve been divided currently, and at the very least, a rank-and-file committee would allow that communication.

To find out more about joining 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:

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site