“Why are we not on strike?”: Anger at the boiling point at Ventra after rejection of UAW contract

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Anger is boiling among Ventra auto parts workers in Evart, Michigan, three days after they overwhelmingly rejected a sellout contract from the United Auto Workers union by 94.5 percent. Wages would have increased only $2.50 over the life of the five year deal, far below the rate of inflation. Workers currently make between $16 and $17 an hour, barely more than fast food workers, laboring in grueling conditions making parts which are critical for the entire auto industry.

In a significant step forward, workers launched the Ventra Evart Workers Rank-and-File Committee Tuesday. They issued a founding statement, demanding a $10 raise, the replacement of the bargaining committee with one drawn from the rank-and-file, the immediate convocation of a strike vote and an end to secret negotiations with management.

The UAW has announced that it will be extending the current agreement past Friday’s expiration date, but has been compelled to call a strike vote. However, this vote will be held either July 6 or 7, an entire week after the expiration of the current deal. Indicating that the UAW is still determined to block a strike, one union official wrote in all capital letters on social media: “A YES TO THE STRIKE VOTE DOES NOT MEAN WE STRIKE SIMPLY THAT WE ARE WILLING TO STRIKE IF THEY MAKE US!!”

One worker told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the scale of opposition in the plant was even greater than indicated in the final tally. “701 was the real count of the no, for the contract. There were 18 spoiled ballots where union members wrote ‘FU. Or F*** No’ on top of the 683 ‘no’ votes.” Opposition to the sellout is running at a fever pitch.

Another said, “We are the ones that make things operate. They are all about themselves and making him [CEO Shahid Khan] that money. He pours millions into the Jacksonville Jaguars and his yachts. He wasn’t even a billionaire before the pandemic and now he’s raking in the profits every month. Even local businesses like Howie’s Pizza have walked out on strike. If they are going to get a contract, why are we not on strike?”

He added, “The bargaining committee agreed to let them put cameras at every workstation right in your face even before the contract is voted on. Why would you sign an agreement for cameras to spy on us before we even have an agreement to vote on? And what about the bargaining committee members that have new vehicles, when the rest of us can barely afford to drive to work? We shouldn’t have to cut [time with] our kids short to make it to work. Right now, the price of groceries and the price of gasoline are so high on what we make you have to decide from week to week which one you’re going to buy.”

A production worker said, “All we know is we need something different; something needs to happen. Especially with this contract they brought [us]. The contract gave us a ‘raise’ of 60 cents [in one year], but we do more work than the money they’re offering us. This is plain ridiculousness!”

He said that high-seniority workers have informed younger workers this was the first strike vote held in over a decade, indicating the corruption of the union bureaucracy. “The union picks and chooses who and what they want. People miss days because of health problems and get written up as no time off and take their points away. The union knows. Management, human resources and the union picks who they protect and the rest of us have to swallow our pride and

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continue working because we need our job.

“A few years ago, we had a woman in the shop lose her life because a pipe fell and hit her in the head. We weren’t able to leave and people had to continue working as our coworker laid on the floor and her blood and water was all over the floor.” Workers last Friday heard that another worker was seriously injured after a 30,000-pound die fell on a worker. “The guy who got hurt was taken to the hospital. Before this happened, we also had two other guys get severely burned.”

Another worker spoke about the broader concerns of workers. “Five year [contracts] don’t make sense. No one knows where the economy will go in five years. We have little to no raise. We’re told that the sister plant in Ionia starts workers at $17 per hour. They could do better.

“We were deemed essential, but we were exposed to COVID. There is no social distancing in a plant, we work on top of each other. If we were to strike the company would try to replace us, they don’t care about us.”

Another line worker spoke about union nepotism. “It’s all in who you know, or what some call it, a friends and family plant. I’m trying to keep it together for my kids’ sake. I shouldn’t have to give my life away or move up in the factory doing something that is gonna kill me or make me hurt more then I already do. They have people brainwashed with the bonuses. I mean they are nice but I’d rather have the raise over a bonus if I’d have to choose between them. $1,000 bonus is a 50 cent raise and a $500 is 25 cents. I would make more with the raise in the long run. Bonuses are here today, gone tomorrow.”

Another worker said, “They walk people out for nothing and then they work the rest of us harder. Short lines mean people have to run multiple machines. The union does nothing. How can I help build a rank and file committee?”

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