

Shipyard workers denounce United Steelworkers, months after contract rammed through at Newport News

B. Grammar
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Are you a shipbuilder at the Norfolk Naval Shipyard? We want to hear from you about conditions in the workplace since this year's contract extension. Contact us by filling out the form at the bottom of this article. All submissions will remain anonymous.

In the months since the most recent sell-out contract rammed through by the United Steelworkers (USW) at Newport News Shipbuilding (NNS) earlier this year, the full consequences of this betrayal have come to light.

The Newport News shipyards, located in southeastern Virginia, are among the most important industrial facilities for the US military, as well as the largest private employer in the state. More than 10,000 workers at the facilities build nuclear-powered aircraft carriers and submarines for the US Navy.

Last year, Newport News workers in USW Local 8888 overwhelmingly rejected a concessionary contract brought by the union. A few days later, USW members at the Huntington Ingalls shipyards in Pascagoula, Mississippi, rejected a proposed five-year contract extension. The Pascagoula shipyards, which employ 7,000 and are also the largest private employer in that state, produce guided missile destroyers and amphibious assault ships for the US Navy. Both shipyards are owned by Huntington Ingalls Industries (HII).

Earlier this year, the union rammed through a second agreement at Newport News, which was a virtual replica of the earlier rejected contract proposal from last year. Local 8888 attempted to confuse workers and reduce access to voting, resulting in a “victory” for the previously rejected agreement whose authenticity has been repeatedly challenged by workers at the shipyard.

Workers were forced to re-vote under conditions of fragmented and inaccessible voting times, massive promotion campaigns in the workplace and in social media and intimidation from union bureaucrats at every level. Workers were handed misleading “highlights” of the contract rather than the full contract in the lead-up to voting. Informational meetings on the contract were repeatedly moved, canceled and concealed. According to official vote totals, little more than one-third of the workforce turned out to vote on the second deal.

The five-year pay scale contains only 12.3 percent wage increases on average for the entire life of the contract, or a rate of 2.46 percent per year. This amounts to a massive cut in real wages under conditions where inflation is currently sitting at 8.5 percent. However, wage increases do not even begin until the second year of the deal. After two years into the contract, individual healthcare contributions also increase.

Having frozen workers' wages with indefinite contract extensions over the course of negotiations, the company and the USW dangled a paltry \$2,000 “essential worker” ratification bonus to lure workers into accepting the deal. For most employees this bonus is long gone already, eaten up by the rapidly rising prices of housing, groceries and gas.

A similar contract was rammed through in December at Pascagoula, again with a turnout of barely one-third of the membership.

At the exact same time that the USW was binding workers to real wage declines, the union and Huntington-Ingalls themselves were enjoying massive growth. The USW's own assets have grown by over \$300 million just since 2018 and it has over three-

quarters of its \$1.3 billion assets in stock market investments. At the same time that workers were being told this contract was their best option, the executives of Huntington Ingalls reported a \$2 billion increase in revenues thanks to contract awards in the first quarter of 2022.

Having been muzzled in their union hall and workplace, workers took to social media to vent their frustration, answering every false assertion by Local 8888. “Hope you enjoyed our inflated dues last week thanks to that ‘bonus’,” one worker said. “I’ve defended this union time and time again but this is total bulls***. Stop taking our money when you do not and obviously will not look out for what is best for us. Unreal.”

Another said, “The union still and always will be paid assassins by the Company & digging in our pocket to support their needs and lifestyles.”

Other comments include:

- “USW Stands for U Steal Wages.”
- “They got paid, we didn’t”
- “Can’t wait to leave this ‘union’”
- “Y’all couldn’t even get the shipbuilders first with the contract. Where was ‘workers first’ at contract time?”
- “They owe us more than what we got, they rape us”
- “Inflation is up 7% in less than a year. this is not a good deal”
- “Shipbuilding before shareholders?! Hahaha. You guys aren’t afraid to lie and deceive your employees anymore before their eyes. Kind of ballsy!”

Many workers simply replied with screenshots of the rules for investigating National Labor Relations Act violations. Posts promoting a unilateral decision by management to send members’ money to support NATO operations in Ukraine were met with even more pointed opposition. “But yet there are no funds set up to support a worker/member when life throws them a blow, cause things do happen in life. It’s ppl laying on the streets right in front of the gates every day ... humanity work ... help those right here in your face ... you guys allowed the company to throw us scraps.”

Another worker asked, “How come this \$40,000 wasn’t voted on by the paying members? Also How does anyone prove where the money is actually going?” Another concluded, “This type of bulljive is exactly why, as recent, a couple thousand of us have left this

joke of a union.”

The USW and the trade union bureaucracy as a whole, particularly in the defense industry and other strategic sectors, are working hand in glove with the White House to prevent walkouts and impose substandard contracts.

On June 14 at an AFL-CIO conference, politically connected historian and anti-Russian hawk Timothy Snyder asserted that the very future of democracy depended on the actions of the unions, which he claimed were now “at the center of history.” Snyder has played a central ideological role in covering up and justifying the leading role of neo-Nazi militias, such as the Azov Battallion, in NATO’s proxy war in Ukraine against Russia.

At around the same time as the convention, President Joe Biden arrived in Los Angeles to make a speech to West Coast dockworkers about the importance of their industry from the deck of the retired battleship USS Iowa. Biden has been working with the unions to keep dockworkers, railroaders, oil refinery workers (who are also USW members) and other critical segments of the workforce on the job. Working with the bureaucracy to stymie the opposition of the working class is the real meaning of his claim to be “the most pro-union President ever.”



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