

As CNH strike reaches 225 days, workers remain determined to win: “We’re all fighting for our families”

Marcus Day
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Work at CNH? We want to hear from you: Fill out the form at the end to tell us what you think are the main issues in the strike and what you’re fighting for.

Roughly 1,100 workers in Racine, Wisconsin and Burlington, Iowa are well into their seventh month on strike at CNH Industrial, the global agricultural and construction equipment maker, with December 13 marking the 225th day of the walkout.

The strike is perhaps the longest by members of the United Auto Workers union since the bitter 17-month walkout by Caterpillar workers in 1994-95. With extraordinary determination, CNH workers are fighting to reverse decades of concessions in wages and benefits.

Workers are well aware that CNH has been reaping banner profits, particularly as soaring commodity prices have buttressed demand for the company’s heavy equipment. At the beginning of November, CNH reported \$670 million in earnings before interest and taxes (EBIT), a measure of profit, for the third quarter, well over financial analysts’ estimates of \$500 million. The company saw “record consolidated revenues for any third quarter in the history of our AG and construction business, at \$5.9 billion, up 29 percent,” said CEO Scott Wine, whose 2021 compensation topped \$21 million.

The company is determined, however, to continue funneling this wealth to its large investors and has arrogantly refused workers’ demands. Management cut off the strikers’ health insurance a week into the walkout, and has been busing in scabs in an effort to continue production.

In late September, the company reportedly presented a “last, best and final” offer to UAW officials. The proposal was apparently so far away from workers’ demands that the UAW did not bring it to a vote, no doubt concerned that it would be massively rejected, given the 90 percent “no” votes defeating UAW-backed contracts at Volvo Trucks and John Deere last year. In response, the company said its offer expired on October 14 and, in a provocative move, said its new proposal would be less generous.

While workers have remained courageous in their opposition to any further concessions, the UAW bureaucracy has not been operating with a strategy to win the strike. Rather, its policy is aimed at starving workers out and ultimately imposing the company’s demands.

The UAW headquarters has conducted a virtual information blackout of the strike and has done nothing to seriously mobilize its hundreds of thousands of members behind the struggle. Workers have been kept on just \$400 a week in strike pay from the union’s gargantuan \$800 million-plus strike fund. Workers at CNH were galled to learn over the summer that the bureaucracy rescinded an increase in strike pay, forcing a “re-vote” on the last day of its convention to lower it from \$500 back to \$400.

“Honestly, they don’t tell us anything,” one younger worker at CNH in Burlington told the WSWS. “All I know is they’re not negotiating right now.”

He said that workers were concerned about receiving their extra holiday strike pay from the UAW in time for Christmas. “I’m just worried to see if we get our holiday pay a week ahead of time. The week of the Thanksgiving holiday they ended up messing up, and we didn’t get it beforehand. I don’t know why that should be an issue. It should be sent out in time.”

“We’re not being told a whole lot,” another worker in Burlington said. “Being misinformed, I don’t believe it should’ve gone on this long.”

“It’s been difficult,” he continued. “CNH cut our insurance off right off the bat. I’ve had to find other temporary employment. We’re used to working at Case; now we have to deal with the whole ladder all over again.”

UAW officials have recently sought to promote dangerous illusions that the Biden administration will mediate in workers’ favor. “Our main focus is to try to get back to the table and end the strike,” UAW Local 807 President Nick Guernsey told local NBC KWQC in early December. “[US Labor Secretary Marty Walsh] has agreed to step in, and we know he’s made contact with the company ... to help try to get the ball rolling.”

Workers should take the intervention of the Labor Secretary and the White House as a serious warning that their strike is in danger. Just this month, the Biden administration and both parties in Congress moved rapidly to block a strike and impose pro-company contracts on tens of thousands of rail workers. Any action by the big-business Democratic Party in relation to the CNH strike would be similarly aimed at defending the company’s profit interests, at the expense of the living standards of workers.

Workers’ demands for significant improvements to wages, benefits and working conditions can and must be won, but this requires that workers take the struggle into their own hands, through the development of rank-and-file strike committees at each plant. Such committees would allow workers to link up and communicate with similar committees of workers at plants like Ford Chicago Assembly, GM Flint, Volvo Trucks, and elsewhere, and mobilize far broader forces throughout the working class.

“I’ve been on strike longer than I worked there”

CNH workers who spoke to the WSWS recently described what they saw as the main issues motivating their struggle.

“I hadn’t been there for too long, just a few months before we went on strike,” another worker in Burlington said. “I’ve been on strike longer than I’ve worked there.”

“One of the major things is the health insurance. We’re looking to stay

at the PPO plan we had before. What they're offering is a three-tier health plan which basically is crap. For the best plan, it's a \$6,000 deductible per person. If your kid breaks their leg, you're going to go broke trying to pay for it. It doesn't really pay for anything."

Summing up what he thought of the significance of the strike and the need for a common struggle in the working class, he said, "I totally believe that all union members should be behind each and every other union member. We're all fighting for our families."

"If I broke an arm I might as well declare bankruptcy"

A fourth Burlington CNH worker told the WSWS, "Everything's still at a standstill. The company offered a 'last, best and final offer' supposedly. I also heard something about the union reaching out to the Secretary of Labor, and I guess he reached out to Case, but they didn't respond.

"Health care's one of the big problems, because they're basically wanting to raise our premiums to where any raise we'd get would be null and void. Their health care they're offering is not a very good plan; if I broke an arm I might as well declare bankruptcy.

"In 2004, that's when Case started the whole three-tier system. That's one of the biggest issues we've had. One hundred years from now I'd still be a C worker [i.e., lower-tier worker]. It should be equal across the board.

"They used to have the '30-and-out program.' Workers were able to retire with their full pension in their 50s. That was one of the things they also pretty much did away with."

Describing their hours, he continued, "We've been on four 10s [10-hour shifts]. When I started, they could do two hours of overtime after eight hours. Then they switched, had a different plant manager come in, and they could decide when we were working. So it was four 10s, but they could still work us two hours over. It's like 6 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. every day. You spend the weekend sleeping.

"From 2014 to about 2021, they had a bonus for safety and improvement suggestions. If you turned in two of those a month, you'd get \$100. Then they switched to a bonus if we improved on our WCM score [World Class Manufacturing, a productivity improvement and speed-up scheme also used by Stellantis]. We've got paid the bonus only twice for WCM. Meanwhile supervisors are getting thousand-dollar-plus bonuses.

"One of the other issues, a lot of guys complaining about how they were working us just enough not to declare unemployment. And then wasting money on stuff they don't need. In the plant, they'll buy a couple pizzas for guys on the line, and then supervisors are out for steak dinners. They spend \$100 on us, then thousands on management, but we're the ones doing all the work."

The worker also spoke about the ongoing national elections for the UAW's top leadership, and the campaign by Mack Trucks worker Will Lehman for UAW president. Lehman has called on UAW members throughout the country to mobilize in support of the CNH strike, and has run on a program calling for the abolition of the corrupt UAW bureaucracy, and the transfer of power and decision-making to workers on the shop floor. In October, supporters of Lehman's campaign visited the picket lines in Burlington, meeting with a warm response from striking workers.

"I liked a lot of what Will was saying, as far as reaching out to workers at companies worldwide, making it a lot harder for the companies to close up shop," he said.

Referring to the many problems workers have reported with the UAW election process—which has seen a massive suppression of voter turnout by

the UAW apparatus—he added, "Some people didn't even know an election was going on. I had to go on to the website to request mine, and I got my ballot the day I was supposed to mail it in."

"Workers at CNH should know that they are not alone"

The walkout at CNH, which began on May 2, is part of a growing upsurge of working class struggle around the world over the past two years, as workers in country after country demand substantial major wage increases to keep up with the soaring cost of living, as well as relief from punishing working conditions and long hours.

In recent weeks, more than 50,000 members of the United Auto Workers have simultaneously been on strike from coast to coast. In addition to CNH workers, walkouts began last month by 48,000 academic workers at the University of California, and in New York City, by 1,600 part-time faculty at the New School and Parsons School of Design, and 250 workers at publishing giant HarperCollins.

While in each case workers are pressing for major improvements to wages and benefits, the pro-corporate UAW bureaucracy has been working to systematically isolate the struggles and shut them down. On Sunday, ACT-UAW Local 7902 announced that it had reached a tentative agreement at the New School, shutting down the strike by part-time instructors before even showing them the contract, let alone holding a vote on it. On Monday, UAW Local 5810 sent its 12,000 members at the University of California back to work after announcing a contract ratification, splitting them off from the remaining 36,000 grad students and other workers who are still striking across the UC system.

Lehman, the rank-and-file candidate for UAW president, told the WSWS, "CNH workers have been striking for the majority of the year. What have the UAW bureaucrats done for them in that amount of time? They have isolated our coworkers who continue their fight alone. What workers everywhere need is a way to increase our strength in the struggles we enter into, and that is where our class solidarity needs to be realized and acted upon.

"I will continue to do everything I can to inform workers about this critically important class battle. I also reiterate my demand that workers must be paid their full incomes out of the UAW's \$800 million strike fund, which rightfully belongs to us and came from our dues money.

"Workers at CNH should know that they are not alone. You are part of a growing movement in the working class all over the world. On every continent, workers are fighting back against inflation and degrading workplaces. For far too long, the union bureaucrats have sought to divide us against each other and enforce whatever the companies want.

"The UAW bureaucrats are not expanding the fight for the CNH workers to win, so we have to do it ourselves from the floor of every shop, of every workplace. Workers at CNH can win, but not on the nationalist perspective the UAW apparatus advances. What we all need is international solidarity, but it begins with rank-and-file committees on every floor. I urge workers at Case New Holland to take the struggle into their own hands and appeal to workers throughout the US and their class coworkers at other CNH plants worldwide to help them win this fight. We can only win if we recognize our class interests on an international basis."



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