

# Striking workers at AdvanSix continue their fight in face of union-management collusion

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1 May 2023

Chemical workers at AdvanSix in Hopewell, Virginia are continuing a strike, now in its third week, after voting down multiple sellout contract proposals negotiated by the four unions covering 341 workers at the plant.

Management had hoped to avoid a strike of 341 chemical workers, as well as divide the workforce, by offering just 51 percent of the bargaining unit a raise. The company crowed that it had “bought” the vote by proposing a 6 percent raise for operators while offering maintenance workers no increase in the first year of the contract. Workers refused to be divided and voted to strike by a significant margin.

The company’s second offer included a miserable 2.5 percent raise for the maintenance side of the unit during the first year of the contract with incremental raises for all workers over the course of the contract. In an effort to bring the strike to a quick resolution, the business agents (BA) of all four of the unions in the bargaining unit unanimously recommended the agreement. However, workers brushed aside the recommendation and again voted down the contract.

The negotiating committee then returned with a third proposal, nearly identical to the previous one. The only change was the addition of Juneteenth being added to the list of potential paid holidays, with workers limited to two choices. Outraged by this sham, workers voted “no” a third time on April 27 by an even wider margin, 166-125.

The four unions representing the striking workers at the Hopewell facility are among the 15 largest in the United States. The United Food and Commercial Workers International Union/International Chemical Workers Union (UFCW/ICWUC) and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) are numbers six and seven respectively. The International

Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM) and the United Association of Journeymen and Apprentices of the Plumbing and Pipe Fitting Industry of the United States and Canada (UA) are numbers 10 and 14.

Significantly, the union officials did not make a recommendation to their members on the third vote. While striking a supposedly neutral pose, union officials are in fact acting as agents of management, seeking to wear workers down by dragging out negotiations while financial pressures mount on strikers, who are receiving little or no financial support, despite the fact that the union treasuries are bulging.

IAM and UA members were supposed to get \$100 per week strike pay, but they have not even received that totally inadequate amount. Members of the IBEW and ICW will receive no strike pay at all. This is all the more outrageous given that the IBEW is in the midst of a corruption scandal. As the WSWS reported in December, in IBEW Local 98 in Philadelphia, at least five union officials were charged with embezzlement of \$600,000 in union dues.

In 2022, the IBEW, with 688,937 members, reported over \$667 million in assets but paid out no strike benefits. This despite the fact that International President Lonnie Stephenson and International Secretary Kenneth Cooper took home well over \$400,000 each last year, while the union’s 12 international vice presidents each earned over \$280,000.

During the contentious railroad workers contract negotiations in the fall of 2022, IBEW members contacted the World Socialist Web Site regarding voter suppression when 40 percent fewer contract ballots were sent to members than were sent out during the previous contract in 2018.

The UFCW/ICWUC, meanwhile, negotiates for 1.3 million workers across industries such as health care, retail, grocery, distillery and more throughout the United States and Canada. Last year, the union's total assets were over \$500 million, but only \$259,053 was allocated for strike benefits, or 0.5 percent of its assets.

According to one AdvanSix worker, strikers are aware of the significance of their movement. The Hopewell South plant is the first facility of AdvanSix in North America whose contract is up this year. The Hopewell North plant will begin contract negotiations in October and the nearby Chester plant's contract is due to expire within the year. The outcome of the current contract struggle will set the precedent for the rest.

However, AdvanSix workers cannot win their fight as long as workers leave negotiations to the unions, who are isolating the strikers and aiding and abetting the company in strong-arming workers to settle.

If the Hopewell South workers are to be successful, they must take the negotiations out of the hands of the unions and form a rank-and-file committee to oversee negotiations and the conduct of the strike.

Strikers must call on their brothers and sisters at all AdvanSix plants to join their struggle in a solidarity strike to ensure AdvanSix cannot continue production until workers' demands at all plants are met. Workers at every plant must organize rank-and-file committees, independent of the pro-management unions in order to put the power back on the shop floor.

The strike at AdvanSix has many similarities to the New River Valley NRV Virginia Volvo Truck strike in 2021. Workers at NRV found themselves fighting on two fronts: a behemoth multinational corporation on one side, and their own union, the UAW, on the other.

Workers at NRV formed the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee (VWRFC) in an attempt to organize opposition to the UAW-imposed isolation of their struggle and to take control of their contract negotiations. Though forced back to work with a contract they had rejected, the VWRFC's battle against Volvo and the UAW exposed the degenerate nature of the union apparatus and has helped spark the formation of rank-and-file committees in plants and across industries and throughout the world.

The NRV struggle also inspired a Mack Trucks worker in Macungie, Pennsylvania, Will Lehman, to

run for UAW president last year. He based his campaign on a socialist program and the goal to abolish the UAW apparatus and put the power back into the hands of the rank and file. Lehman won 5 percent of the vote.

The strike at the New River Valley plant in Virginia developed in the context of a surge of anger stoked by the homicidal treatment of workers during the COVID pandemic. AdvanSix workers, as well as workers internationally, not only continue to contend with the threat of COVID, but they are also facing rising inflation and austerity and the prospect of war with Russia and China.

Rick, founding member of the VWRFC, offered the following words of support to striking AdvanSix workers:

“Keep up the good work and sticking together. Don't cave in at the 1st decent carrot. That carrot will only go to a certain segment of the workforce. This will only divide you and create a hostile environment to work. Stay strong to get everyone the raise they deserve and better work conditions. Good luck my working brothers and sisters.”

*Are you an AdvanSix worker? Fill the form about below to get more information about building rank-and-file committees.*



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