

Wabtec bringing in scabs in attempt to break Erie, Pennsylvania strike

Samuel Davidson
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Are you a striking Wabtec worker or work in the railroad manufacturing industry? Tell us what you think about the conditions at Wabtec or the factory where you work by filling out the form at the bottom of this article. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Now in the second week of their strike, workers on the picket line outside Wabtec's Erie, Pennsylvania plant expressed outrage against the multi-billion dollar manufacturer of locomotives and other equipment for the railroad industry in comments to *World Socialist Web Site* reporters.

"The company is greedy, it is all about profits for them. They don't care about the workers, yet we are the ones who make them their money," said one worker with 20 years of service who asked that his name not be used.

Scores of workers were present on the picket line as the company brought in scabs in an attempt to resume production and break the strike. Many of the scabs had been hired on in the weeks and months before the strike and allowed to work in the plant alongside now-striking workers as "contractors."

The 1,400 workers voted last week overwhelmingly to strike, rejecting Wabtec's final offer of massive concessions, including cuts to healthcare, and continuing the hated two-tier wage system, which has young workers making just \$21 an hour and taking 10 years to reach top pay.

Yesterday, over 1,400 workers at Hamilton, Ontario railcar manufacturer National Steel Car (NSC) launched a strike at 12:01 a.m. after voting to reject the company's provocative "best and final offer." With an 80 percent turnout, 52 percent of workers voted "No." In so doing, they defied not only company management, but the United Steelworkers union (USW) bureaucracy, which has done everything in its power to block a strike and divide and demoralize the rank and file.

Wabtec workers told the WSWWS that they were fighting for basic issues including healthcare, wages, abolishing a two-tier system, pension, vacation. Workers at the plant have

not had a pay raise in nine years.

Especially hated was a point system used to discipline workers and the lack of an effective grievance process.

"When you complain about something, all they say is file a grievance. They know it will go nowhere," one said. The worker explained that the company instituted a point system in which workers can get put on points for anything: "If your wife gets taken to the hospital, they put you on points. If you are in a crash on the way to work, and can prove it, they point you. They are firing people left and right."

The main issues are the blatant disrespect for the contract; they are not going by the contract. "They are firing people at will," said Frank, who has worked at the Erie plant for 35 years. "The grievance process is broke."

Frank's coworker Dale agreed. He described how one of their co-workers was unjustly fired and forced move to West Virginia after selling her home and everything she owned.

"It took a year," Dale said. "Finally they brought in an arbitrator and the company said it was a mistake. She sold everything she had and moved to West Virginia because she didn't have a job. What is someone supposed to do for a whole year, because you made a mistake? It just isn't right."

Dale was also against the two-tier wage system. "The newer workers coming in have a 10-year progression to make what we make. It is a joke. In 10 years, what is our top wage going to be then? The way the economy is going, top wage is going to be minimum wage."

William, who has worked at the plant for 20 years, agreed. He was angry about the way that new hires are being treated compared to the contractors, who have been hired to take their jobs.

"The new hires, they have them coming in at \$21 an hour," said William. The new hires, William went on, are "on a 10-year progression. Then they have these contractors coming in, right under our noses and paying them \$34 an hour plus \$100 a day per diem for a hotel. It is just terrible.

"It is creating a hostile work environment. This company doesn't care about the working people here. We are family people, we are not bugs."

The company has also attacked healthcare and pension benefits. Workers at the Erie plant manufacture locomotives for freight trains. They were part of General Electric until 2019, when Wabtec bought the GE Transportation division in an \$11 billion cash and stock swap deal.

At that time, workers launched a powerful strike after Wabtec imposed the terms of a new contract that included a two-tier wage structure, the ability of management to hire temporary workers, with no rights, for up to 25 percent of the jobs.

The United Electrical workers called off the strike after nine days, after it reached a 90-day temporary contract with Wabtec that included most of the company's draconian demands.

The final deal included many of the demands that workers are fighting against now, including the elimination of pensions and cuts to healthcare.

"The deductibles are outrageous," William said. "You can actually go \$10,000 in debt with the deductibles if you get sick. You have to get gap insurance to cover your family, who can afford that? Ten grand."

Dale agreed. "Now they are coming after our healthcare, they can raise our healthcare at any time. They are raising our out-of-pocket expenses through the roof. It just isn't right.

"Meanwhile, they have record profits every quarter, but we make too much money, it just isn't right."

According to its website, Wabtec has about 27,000 employees at roughly 50 plants operating in the United States, Europe, Canada, Mexico, Australia and South America.

Wabtec was formed in 1999 from a merger of the Westinghouse Air Brake Company and MotivePower Industries. Westinghouse Air Brake itself dates back to 1869. Since the financial crash of 2008, Wabtec has been going on a buying spree funded by Wall Street investors, acquiring many plants and companies involved in manufacturing for rail transportation.

The railroad freight transportation industry as a whole has become one of the most profitable sectors of the economy. This is not because of new innovations, but because of vicious assaults on the workforce: cutting crews and maintenance, and demanding long hours.

Wabtec is doing the same to the manufacturing side of the railroad business.

Last year, rail maintenance workers in the UK struck a Wabtec rail maintenance facility in Doncaster against real terms wage cuts and a reactionary "fire and hire" scheme.

The United Electrical workers has promoted an image as a more "progressive" union, in contrast to more openly right-wing and corrupt unions such as the United Auto Workers,

Steelworkers and Teamsters.

UE officials often share platforms with many Democrats who are labeled "progressives" and even "socialists," but the UE is committed to the same policy of corporatist labor-management cooperation as other, larger, US unions.

It was the UE's decision to end the 2019 strike and push through a contract with many of the concessions that workers are fighting against today. In 2019, Bernie Sanders endorsed the UE betrayal of the strike, falsely calling it a victory for workers everywhere.

The UE is seeking to do the same in the current strike. While workers are fighting for ending the two-tier wage system, for full healthcare, pensions, and a substantial wage increase, the UE has reframed the strike as one to bring "green jobs" into Erie.

On its website the UE writes:

"The 1400 members of UE Locals 506 and 618 who build locomotives for Wabtec in Erie, PA are striking for green jobs. The two locals are working hard to bring new work into the plant through the Green Locomotive Project.

"Instead of working with the union to create good jobs building green locomotives, the company is spending hundreds of millions of dollars on stock buybacks, mergers & acquisitions."

Wabtec itself has announced some massive contracts to build electric locomotives and ones that can run on biodiesel. In seeking to reframe the strike as a "Green Locomotive Project" and ignoring the demands for better wages, benefits and working conditions, the UE is making clear to Wabtec that they can be a trusted partner and will continue their role of pushing through concessions in the interests of management.

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