

“They are trying to take everything away from the working class”: Wabtec seeks to restore production with scabs at Erie, Pennsylvania plant

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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 12th day of their strike, Wabtec workers confirmed that the company had been hiring scabs and bringing them into the Erie, Pennsylvania plant at least 2 weeks before the start of the strike.

In response to a question about the scabbing, one worker wrote to the *World Socialist Web Site*:

“Yes, they brought people in to work prior to the strike. We still had an open contract with Wabtec. We heard total scabs; about 110 people are in Wabtec now.

“They brought them in on the weekend when the workers were not working overtime.”

The worker confirmed that workers did not train the scabs and pointed out that much of the work they did had to be redone.

Wabtec is seeking to hire subcontractors, temporary workers, that they can bring in and replace long term workers.

“That’s part of the subcontracting. That was blatant disregard for the contract,” he said. Wabtec “is doing what they wanted.”

The 1,400 workers voted overwhelmingly to strike last Thursday, June 22 and the strike began that evening at 7 p.m. Workers by over 90 percent rejected Wabtec’s final offer of massive concessions, which included huge cuts to healthcare and the elimination of a week’s vacation for workers with 30 years service.

United Electrical Workers (UE) Local 506 and 618, the union at Wabtec, are set to meet with the company on Thursday at 10 a.m. and have planned a rally outside the company’s offices in Pittsburgh for 4 p.m. that afternoon.

The strike by workers at Wabtec is part of a growing movement of workers both in the United States and internationally against the continued assault of corporations against workers’ living standards and rights, including workers in the railroad and railroad manufacturing industry.

This past Thursday 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.”

The Hamilton plant, is just 160 miles from the Wabtec plant in Canada on the other side of Lake Erie. Workers at that plant are

fighting two enemies. In addition to National Steel Car, they are fighting the United Steelworkers, which has been working with the company to push through a concessions contract. To do this, workers have taken the important stand in forming a rank-and-file committee.

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.

Workers at the Erie plant have not had a pay raise in 9 years. Pensions were eliminated in 2019 and the company has instituted a point system used to fire workers.

The company proposal also maintained the hated two-tier wage system, which has young workers making just \$21 an hour and taking 10 years to reach top pay.

Workers at the East gate of the plant spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about why they are on strike.

For Jeffrey the grievance process and the right to strike were central.

“The grievance process and the right to strike,” Jeffrey said, were the main issues for him. “Treat everybody equally. Treat everybody the same.

“We have a point system that we didn’t have. It was written down into the contract.”

Under the point system, the company disciplines and fires workers.

Jason agreed with Jeffrey. Up until 2019, employees had the right to strike over unsolved grievances. Now the company drags out the grievance process for years.

“Really this is about the right to strike. We have nothing to bargain with,” said Jason.

“I’ve been here 20 years, we have struck three times. Once for 4 hours, I believe the other two were for an hour each time. But now we don’t have any power.

“Management gets rid of people all the time. They just do what they want. They violate the contract so many times. We have so many unsolved grievances that are going to the third step of arbitration. The process is so slow we only get a few done in a four year contract. It is a big problem.”

Jason also pointed to the need for a decent wage increase to keep pace with inflation and that changes to health insurance mean that workers will be forced to pay more and more over the course of the contract.

“Financially, we haven’t had a raise in 8 years. We need something.

They have no cap on insurance. Insurance is going to go out the roof. They are just going to back charge us. Whenever it goes up, they are just going to feed it to us. That is why they are leaving everything open.

“They need to put caps on things. We don't need to be worrying about what we will be paying for insurance two years from now. They can turn the tables on us and have us paying 80 percent and them paying 20. All they have to say is we can't afford it. And they take back everything they gave us and then some. They can very well do that if everything is open ended.”

Jeffrey agreed, pointing out that it is the employees who produce everything but don't get the benefits.

“We work hard in here,” Jeffrey said. “We make them a lot of profits. But all the profits go to them. It is about the way you treat the people.

“If you don't defend your rights, nobody will. So you have to defend yourself.”

Ryan, who has worked at the plant for 12 years said that health care and the wages for new hires were most important for him.

“On healthcare,” Ryan said, Wabtec should “not be able to take away our benefits over the next four years.

“The progression for new hires; we are trying to get their wages brought up to ours. Ten years is too long for new hires to have their wages brought up to ours.

“They are just a greedy, corporate United States company. They are trying to take everything away from the working class so that they can give it to the shareholders. That's what they are doing to us.

“We are the ones producing their profits. Yet other people who don't even work for Wabtec are making the gains.

“You look at the other unions, what they are going through right now, we are all facing the same struggle. It is about the economic issues. Look at the economy, how things have increased, but wages haven't gone up.

“We haven't had a cost of living raise. All the working class is fighting the same thing right now.”

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 UE called off the strike after nine days, after it reached a 90-day temporary contract with Wabtec. The final deal included most of the company's draconian demands which the workers are fighting against now.

The UE has promoted an image of itself as a more “progressive” union. UE officials often share platforms with 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.

On its website www.ueunion.org the UE has defined the strike as one over the grievance process and bringing “Green Locomotive Jobs” to Erie, while saying absolutely nothing about the workers demands for a substantial wage increase; ending the two tier wage structure; restoring health care benefits; maintaining vacation; and abolishing the hated point system.

In an article in *Jacobin*, a publication tied to the Democratic Party

and featured prominently on the UE website, it defines the strike as only over the grievance process and fighting climate change.

While workers certainly are very concerned about global warming and protecting their workplace rights, workers should not have to sacrifice their hard won benefits and living standards to pay for it. After all, it was the corporate greed and the never ending push for greater and greater profits that is threatening the planet, not workers' living standards.

The reason the UE and their backers in *Jacobin* are focusing on what they call the 'Green Locomotive Project' and ignoring the other demands of workers is so that they can negotiate a deal with Wabtec in which exchange for the promise of “Green Locomotive Jobs” at some point in the undisclosed future, the UE will agree to massive concessions.

Workers at Wabtec should follow the example of the workers at the Hamilton, Ontario plant who have formed a rank-and-file committee to take the leadership and organization of the strike out of the hands of the USW bureaucracy that is seeking to betray it. They are demanding full strike pay and seeking to broaden their struggle.

These committees will advance a bold set of demands, based on what the workers need and not what Wabtec deems affordable. These demands should include:

- End the 2-tier wage structure
- 25 percent pay raise to make up for lost wages from inflation
- Full cost-of-living raises to offset ongoing inflation
- Full company paid health benefits
- A defined benefit pension plan
- Abolition of the point system

Above all, the rank and file committee will work to end the isolation of the strike and unite workers with their class brothers and sisters throughout the world through the International Workers Alliance of Rank and File Committees.

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