

Wabtec presses demands for deep concessions as strike enters third week

Samuel Davidson
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Are you a striking Wabtec worker or do you 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.

The strike by 1,400 workers at the Wabtec locomotive manufacturing plant in Erie, Pennsylvania has entered its third week, with the corporation refusing to budge on its demands for sweeping concessions and escalating its efforts to break the strike with scabs and management personnel.

Negotiators for the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE) met with company officials Tuesday for the second time since the walkout began on June 22. Following the meeting, the company said that “the parties remain far apart on key issues—including wages and benefits.” Negotiations are supposed to resume on Friday, July 14.

Wabtec has not moved from the demands contained in its June 10 proposal, which workers rejected by over 90 percent.

The UE, for its part, has outlined a limited set of demands, which are totally inadequate for workers who have not had a pay raise in nine years. Even if the company granted the UE proposal in full, workers would still be far behind in terms of purchasing power.

According to a summary of the UE proposal on the company’s website—which has not been contradicted by union officials—the UE is demanding a 5 percent pay increase in the first year of the contract, followed by 3 percent increases in each of the remaining three years. In addition, the union is seeking a \$1.00 cost-of-living (COLA) increase in the first year, followed by 15 cents in each of the following years.

In addition, the UE is proposing to leave the hated two-tier wage system intact, while shortening the “progression” period for workers to reach top pay from 10 years to five. The UE is also demanding no reduction in health benefits, and the right to strike within 60 days after a grievance has completed step 3. The union made no proposal to restore

pensions or to eliminate the punitive point system.

The company has responded by holding firm on its concession demands, while moving a few dollars around. It is still demanding a 10-year progression for all new hires and massive cuts to health care. On personal days, vacations, strikes and lockouts and subcontracting, it is sticking to the concessions demands presented in the June 10 offer.

The company has rejected the demand for COLA and has only offered a 3.65 percent raise in the first year; 3 percent in the second, no increase in the third year—just a \$3,000 lump sum payment—and a 2.5 percent raise in the final year of the contract.

Last Thursday, the UE held a rally at the Wabtec headquarters in Pittsburgh, which was attended by several hundred workers and supporters. It was addressed by the usual suspects of union leaders and Democratic Party politicians who made empty promises to support the strike. Not a word was mentioned about the courageous strike by 1,400 workers at National Steel Car across Lake Erie in Hamilton, Ontario who are fighting for many of the same demands as Wabtec workers. Both companies are controlled by the same groups of Wall Street and Bay Street financiers who want to impoverish workers to boost their profits.

Instead, the emphasis was placed on bringing “Green Jobs to Erie,” which was aimed at boosting illusions in the Biden administration and the Democratic Party. This is a reactionary dead end. Biden is promoting “clean energy” and the transition to electric vehicles not because the longtime corporate shill cares about the environment but because it is part of his administration’s escalating economic and military conflict with China and Russia.

At the rally, supporters of the *World Socialist Web Site* distributed articles on the National Steel Car strike, which few workers knew about. “We need to all stand together,” one worker commented, adding, “We have been silent too long.”

“I’m the fifth generation to work in this plant,” said Matthew Cuning, who has worked at the Wabtec plant for eight months and is one of the second-tier workers. “My

great-great grandfather worked there in 1915; he worked in the foundry. He moved his whole family from Hamilton, Ontario to work there. I came here because I'm really proud of the legacy of the plant."

Matthew carried a sign, which read, "My Grandfather had more purchasing power. He retired from GE T in 1984!" referring to the previous owner of the locomotive factory, General Electric Transportation. "Our wages are equivalent to what wages were 20 years ago. Why do we want to go backwards when we should be going forward?"

"This is about them lying to us and not following through on the last contract. I'm a new hire and it didn't take me long to figure it out. The whole idea of the two-tier system is wrong."

Matthew's co-worker Mike Denning, a production tech with less than a year at the plant, also denounced the two-tier system as wrong. "I stand next to people all day long, making the same parts, with the same quality for \$10 to \$20 less an hour." The two-tier system, he added, "is just a way to divide us and make us feel like less of an employee. It is not the type of job that you just walk into without training. We are building locomotives."

Commenting on the company's offer, Mike said: "With medical expenses we will actually make less than what we are making now. On top of that, they are asking for the right to change our medical plan whenever they want. They will be changing it every year because when they can, they will."

Rick Stafford is also a tier-2 worker who works on high-voltage motors. "The benefits are important. They need to equalize what we are making in our communities. They are not; they are trying to destroy us, they are trying to keep our community in the gutter, and I think it is terrible. Everyone should be getting paid equally. You start out in a progression, but their progression is way too long, way too long."

Referring to health benefits, he said, "What they actually offered us is like \$700 to \$1,000 less than what we are making right now—when you look at the benefits. What they are giving us, is being taken away with our benefits. You are losing, and inflation has even made it worse."

"We need to win this because Wabtec destroyed the contract last time and took a lot of things away from the workers, like pensions. The company makes enough money, there should be pensions for everyone. GE had thousands of people working for them and they all had pensions. Now there are 1,400 people or less and they can't afford pensions? That's not right."

"All they want to do is keep the poor poor, keep the rich rich. It is time for people to stand up and fight for what is right!"

In 2019, workers at the plant went on strike after Wabtec

bought the plant and the entire GE Transportation division in an \$11 billion cash and stock swap deal. The UE called off the strike after nine days, after it reached a 90-day temporary contract with Wabtec. The deal included most of the company's draconian demands which workers are fighting now: the elimination of pensions, two-tier wages, the point system and the elimination of the right to strike over grievances.

If this struggle is to be won, rank-and-file workers must take the control of the fight. They should follow the example of the National Steel Car workers in Hamilton, Ontario who have formed a rank-and-file committee to take the leadership and organization of the strike out of the hands of the United Steelworkers bureaucracy that is seeking to betray it.

Wabtec workers should establish their own rank-and-file committee to advance and fight for a bold set of demands, based on what the workers need and not what Wabtec deems affordable. This 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

Workers must be on guard against every effort by the UE bureaucracy to shut down the strike and impose another sellout deal like they did in 2019. There should be no return to work without workers getting to see the full contract, not just a summary of self-serving highlights, and workers having a full week to read and discuss it.

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 at National Steel Car, at UPS, the auto industry, striking screenwriters and actors, railroad and port workers in the US and Canada, and other workers throughout the world through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

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