

United Electrical workers union rams through contract to shut down Wabtec strike in Erie, Pennsylvania

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Are you a Wabtec worker? Tell us what you think about the contract and conditions at Wabtec. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

On Thursday, the United Electrical workers (UE) union rammed through a sellout contract at locomotive manufacturer Wabtec less than 24 hours after reaching a tentative agreement, shutting down a strike by 1,400 workers which had lasted for more than two months.

At a union meeting held Thursday afternoon, striking workers were presented with a 100-page contract and told to vote on it by 3:00 p.m. “They notified us less than 24 hours ago that the meeting would be today (Thursday) at noon, and they went over it with us very briefly,” one striking worker told the *World Socialist Web Site*.

“They went over all the main points with us briefly but talked to us as if they already knew it was going to pass. They said pretty much that it was their best and final offer, and if we didn’t say yes, Wabtec was going to have to make some ‘hard decisions’ moving forward.” In other words, the UE bureaucracy used management intimidation to its advantage to pass the contract.

“It’s terrible. I voted it down,” another worker said. “The language is very loose. Terrible contract. This was done purposely. [They] didn’t give enough time to review it. Less than 12 hours. I think it’s absurd.”

The 1,400 members of the United Electrical locals 506 and 614 have been on strike since June 22 against the locomotive manufacturer Wabtec in Erie, Pennsylvania, after overwhelmingly rejecting the company’s final offer.

In a statement that did not give any details, UE Local 506 President Scott Slawson claimed, “This contract

represents a substantial improvement over what Wabtec had on the table in June.”

In fact, the contract was basically the same as the one presented in June, with a few cosmetic changes.

On wages, the new contract has a \$1,500 signing bonus and increases of 3.65 percent in the first year, followed by 3, 3.25 and then 3 percent in each of the last three years of the contract. This is slightly more than the company’s original offer but far below the what workers needed to make up for inflation and after having gone nine years without a pay raise.

Most importantly, the contract maintains the hated two-tier wage system, which starts new hires at two-thirds the wages of their experienced counterparts.

“This is not right,” said one worker with less than five years’ experience. “We are doing the same work. It’s not like we’re being trained for 10 years. We are doing the same work as the person standing next to me, we should be getting paid the same.”

Under the deal, a starting employee will earn just over \$22 an hour, compared to nearly \$35 an hour for what both the union and company disparagingly call a “legacy worker.”

“We are making locomotives,” the worker said. “This is a highly skilled and dangerous job. The company is making billions. Every other week they announce a new project.

“Prices are going up. Food, rent, gas, everything is going up. People deserve a living wage.”

On healthcare benefits, Wabtec said that the contract brings employees in line with what it offers other workers, with a 4 percent increase in premiums in each of the first two years followed by an undisclosed amount in each of the last two years.

“I think it was a ‘Hail Mary’ attempt to threaten us into accepting a pitiful contract,” a worker with one year’s service said. “They wanted us back before we get our unemployment and in time for their fourth quarter push. They are running out of stockpile and have obligations to meet.”

Asked about the differences between this contract and the one rejected in June, he responded, “Exactly my point; 71 days for what?”

“They divided and scared these good hardworking people into taking less than they deserve. But the funny thing is, that they said their offer on June 22 was their last and final offer. Then they went and made changes. We didn’t fall for it then.”

The worker went on to point out that the pay raise will not even cover the added cost of health insurance. “As far as the new hires, there is still a 10-year progression. We just get slightly more in the early years, like a dollar instead of 34 cents.

“They won’t even give us back the vacation that they made us schedule before we went out, and then while we were out, if we had days that fell during the strike, we don’t get those back. I had half of my vacation for the year scheduled in June, July and August, and now I don’t get any of it back.”

Another worker said, “Everything that the union said they were fighting for, we got none of it!” He added sarcastically, “I’m glad that some people in the union got paid from Wabtec for this, because it wasn’t the workers, that’s for damn sure.”

This is only the latest betrayal by the UE bureaucracy. Four years ago, the UE called off a nine-day strike against Wabtec and pushed through many of the concessions that workers were fighting against now.

Then workers were told that these concessions, including a wage freeze, two-tier pay scale, the elimination of pensions and more, were necessary because Wabtec had just bought the plant. The promise at the time was that the union would recover the concessions with the next contract.

The UE has long cultivated an image as being a more “progressive” and even “radical” union, in contrast to the United Auto Workers, Steelworkers and Teamsters. But in reality, its track record is no different.

In addition to its long historical association with Stalinism, the UE bureaucracy also has close ties with the Democratic Socialists of America, Labor Notes and

other “left-wing” groups, which in reality function as factions of the Democrats and are helping prop up the tattered reputation of the trade union bureaucracy.

At the Labor Notes convention last year, a UE official participated alongside Bernie Sanders, Teamsters General President Sean O’Brien, Association of Flight Attendants (AFA-CWA) President Sara Nelson and others. In a panel discussion he rejected a suggestion from an audience member that the “elephant in the room” was the “traitorous union bureaucracy.” He was, however, speaking as a member of this bureaucracy.

Since the strike began, the union tried to isolate the strike from the growing movement of workers, not only worldwide, but on the other side of Lake Ontario. It isolated workers from the strike by Canadian workers against National Steel Car in Hamilton, Ontario. Like the UE, the United Steel Workers ultimately rammed through a deal almost identical to the one already rejected.

The betrayal at Wabtec is further confirmation that workers have to fight not only management but the union bureaucracy. But while the UE has managed to ram through a sellout, nothing has been resolved as far as workers are concerned. The way forward at Wabtec is through building rank-and-file committees as part of a growing movement of rank-and-file workers among autoworkers, railroad workers, UPS workers, healthcare workers and educators.



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