

Strike shuts down Pennsylvania auto parts plant

Douglas Lyons
13 September 2023

Last Monday, over 100 manufacturing workers, members of United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 644, launched a strike in Royersford, Pennsylvania, against Dometic Group, a multi-billion-dollar global corporation headquartered in Sweden that manufactures specialized products for vehicles such as RVs and boats. The plant is located about 30 miles northwest of Philadelphia.

After being classified as “essential workers” because they make ‘mobile living’ items, Dometic workers have been forced to work throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Now the company has offered an insulting 10.1 percent wage increase, dribbled out over the next three years. This will be more than offset by increased healthcare costs of 5 percent over the same period— and by inflation, which has greatly reduced the purchasing power of workers’ paychecks.

Dometic Group is a multinational corporation operating in 11 different countries with 25 manufacturing and assembling facilities globally, according to its web site. It sells products in 100 countries, ranging from electric and battery-powered coolers, portable solar energy, and outdoor appliances for camping, boating and other nonessential recreational activities. At the Royersford plant, workers make highly profitable mechanical steering control systems and throttle and shift cables. In last year’s financial report, Dometic brought in revenue of roughly \$270 million. According to industry journal RVBusiness, Dometic’s second quarter report for the current year shows “record-high cash flow.”

As of this writing, neither Dometic management nor the president and CEO Juan Vargues have commented on the strike.

A supporter of Dometic workers condemned the corporation on social media: ‘It’s a damn shame a company who makes millions [when] their workers cannot afford to eat. The CEO drives around in a Porsche and brags about his wonderful life. Totally disgraceful and disrespectful to the employees who give their blood, sweat and tears to a company who doesn’t give a **** about them. Welcome to corporate America!’

This strike is happening amid a rapidly escalating

confrontation between workers and the corporations, which are sitting on unprecedented profits extracted from the international working class— and are hellbent on taking still more. With the expiration of contracts at the Big Three in the United States and Canada, along with Mack Trucks, another company owned by a Swedish parent corporation, Volvo Group, a potential showdown is brewing among workers determined to win their demands after decades of givebacks.

Autoworkers at the Big Three have authorized strike action, while actors and writers have been waging a months-long strike against the film giants. Auto parts workers at Lear Seating plant in Hammond, Indiana have rejected a third sellout contract brought back by the UAW, demonstrating once again the irreconcilable conflict between the union and the workers it falsely claims to represent.

The UAW bureaucracy in Region 9, which covers most of New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey, issued a video on Facebook admitting that ‘wages are nowhere near [what is] needed to survive.’ The video does not explain, however, why the UAW has allowed workers to labor under conditions that do not permit survival. Then, after this damning admission, the video takes on the voice of Dometic management, proclaiming that the wage offer in the corporate contract proposal is ‘the highest in Dometic history.’

The current director of UAW Region 9 is Daniel Vicente, who was formerly an official of Local 644. Vicente was elected this year in a fraudulent election in which the UAW bureaucracy suppressed the vote of rank-and-file UAW members. This resulted in one of the lowest turnouts in union election history.

In his new position Vicente will allegedly lead ‘negotiations’ between the Mack-Volvo corporation and Mack workers, who have voted 98 percent to strike, an almost 20 percent increase from 2019. Mack Trucks in Macungie, Pennsylvania is home to Will Lehman, a rank-and-file socialist who ran for UAW President to abolish the UAW bureaucracy and bring rank-and-file power to the shop

floor.

Vicente, who was elected as part of UAW president Shawn Fain's bogus "reform" slate, has a sordid history of selling out workers. But to climb the greasy pole of the union bureaucracy, he first had to make an example out of a rebellious workforce. In 2021, Local 644 leadership, of which he was a part, refused to call a strike after workers at the Dana parts plant in Pottstown rejected a contract by 97 percent—thereby giving the company time to stockpile inventory.

The stifling of workers' initiative has continued into the current situation. According to Dana workers in Pottstown, UAW Local 644 has hardly mentioned the struggle at Dometic, despite them all being members of the same local. "If it were not for [the WSWs] I wouldn't have even known about this strike," said one worker when asked about it.

"I get what they [the Dometic] workers are striking over," another Dana worker told the WSWs. "I definitely empathize with them. But I'm also frustrated because when our contract was up [in 2021] and we were left working without one, at least 90 percent of us wanted to strike. Our reps fell silent. They didn't put in any effort."

The Dana workers speak from bitter experience. After its wrecking operation against Dana rank-and-file opposition, the UAW forced through a sellout contract that sanctioned and intensified poverty wages, entrenched the hated tier system, and mandated weekend shifts. The UAW collusion with management is aimed to increase corporate profits, pure and simple. This even as Dana Corporation has increased revenue by 72 percent over the past 10 years!

In response to these repeated betrayals, Dana workers in Pottstown, Pennsylvania formed the Dana Pottstown Workers Rank-and-File Committee to reverse the sweatshop conditions not only at Dana but throughout the auto industry and every workplace.

"The point of being in a union is so workers fight together," a Dana worker explained. The worker said that Local 644's decision to call a small strike was entirely in keeping with what the UAW usually does with the rest of the membership. "People are being kept in the dark," the worker said. He then referenced UAW president Shawn Fain's closed door meetings with US President Biden. "We need to know what is being discussed," the worker said, adding "that's why we need rank-and-file-committees in place."

Unless Dometic workers take the struggle out of the hands of the UAW executives, they will walk into the same trap the "union" laid for Dana workers and countless others before them. UAW Region 9's frank admission that poverty wages amount to the 'highest in history' is an indictment of the role being played by the bureaucracy. Essentially another layer of management, the union apparatus collaborates with

the multinational corporations and the Biden administration to slash labor costs by locking wages below the level of inflation, ramping up shop floor exploitation, and gutting retirement and health care benefits.

For Dometic workers to win inflation-breaking wage increases, COLA, better healthcare and retirement benefits, and job security, the strike must not be left in the hands of UAW officials. Dometic workers need to build their own rank-and-file strike committee in opposition to corporate management, collaborating UAW bureaucrats, and capitalist politicians, whether Democrat or Republican.

Unity with the working class is essential for winning the strike. Workers at Dometic manufacturing facilities in the US and internationally need to rally to the support of their brothers and sisters at the Royersford plant. Lines of communication should be established for a counter-offensive.

Dometic workers must also forge an alliance with the Dana rank-and-file committee. The Dana facility is only ten miles from the Dometic plant. Workers at both facilities are ostensibly "represented" by the same local, 644, that produced the recently promoted Vicente. In reality, only a rank-and-file committee can actually represent workers at these two neighboring plants. Dometic workers must also build connections to auto workers at the Big Three and Mack Trucks, who are now entering into struggle. There is little time to lose.

Global corporations like Dometic have an international strategy. To fight back, workers need one as well. Join a growing rebellion of the international working class by contacting the WSWs today to start a rank-and-file strike committee.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact