

# Draftsmen strike at Bath Iron Works as UAW bureaucracy pleads with War Secretary Hegseth

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More than 620 shipyard workers at Bath Iron Works (BIW) in Bath, Maine walked off the job at midnight Monday after overwhelmingly rejecting a contract offered by General Dynamics, the massive military-industrial conglomerate that owns the facility. The strikers are members of the Bath Marine Draftsmen's Association (BMDA), UAW Local 3999, and include designers, engineers, clerks and technicians whose labor is essential to the production of guided-missile destroyers for the United States Navy.

Under the escalating drive of American militarism, the same workers that the ruling class demands build its warships at breakneck speed are denied wages that keep pace with inflation, affordable healthcare or any meaningful retirement security.

The immediate trigger for the walkout was General Dynamics' so-called "best and final offer," which the company trumpeted as including "historic annual wage increases" of 10.1 percent in the first year, followed by 4 percent in each of the three subsequent years—a compounded total of 23.8 percent over four years. As reported, more than 75 percent of the membership voted to reject it.

General Dynamics reported full-year 2025 net earnings of \$4.2 billion on revenue of \$52.6 billion—an 11 percent jump in profits over the prior year. The company sits on a staggering order backlog of \$110 billion, providing guaranteed revenue streams stretching years into the future. It has returned billions to its shareholders through dividends and stock buybacks while many of its own workers, according to BMDA President Trent Vellella, "live paycheck to paycheck."

On February 9, so-called Secretary of War Pete Hegseth descended on Bath Iron Works as part of his "Arsenal of Freedom" tour, a nationwide propaganda circuit of defense contractors intended to whip up nationalist fervor for accelerated war production.

Speaking before roughly 850 assembled shipyard workers, Hegseth delivered a red-meat speech, calling BIW "the birthplace of American shipbuilding" and promising that the Trump administration would push production of Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyers—also known as DDGs—to the

absolute limit. "I don't know if I'm supposed to say this yet, but we're maxing out on DDGs," he told the crowd, which was met with chants of "USA!"

Hegseth also used the occasion to attack what he called "distractions and debris"—his euphemisms for diversity programs and protections for LGBTQ+ workers. "No more DEI. No more dudes in dresses. No more climate change worship, social justice or political correctness," he declared from the stage. The speech was a naked attempt to bind workers' identities to the military and its employer, General Dynamics, rather than to their class interests as workers.

The Trump administration has floated plans for a new "Trump class" of warships—described as longer and larger than any current Navy vessel outside of aircraft carriers and fitted with missiles, rail guns and lasers still under development. Bath Iron Works has signaled its eagerness to design and build them. Meanwhile, the Pentagon's recently signed defense appropriations law directed \$1 billion toward a new Arleigh Burke destroyer, \$450 million for shipyard infrastructure modernization, and \$300 million in so-called "wage enhancements" to be split between BIW and Mississippi-based Huntington Ingalls Industries.

The federal government appropriated \$150 million or more in wage subsidies to BIW workers—and General Dynamics responded by offering a contract workers found unacceptable. The money did not reach the workers. It vanished into General Dynamics' balance sheet, enriching its shareholders.

The escalating military production at Bath Iron Works does not exist in a vacuum. Each Arleigh Burke-class destroyer, the backbone of the Navy's surface fleet, costs approximately \$2 billion and takes six years to build. They are the instruments of a government now openly conducting an intensified military campaign in Iran, expanding its naval posture across the Pacific, and funding proxy conflicts around the world. The workers of Bath Iron Works are being asked to sacrifice their wages and their health to produce the hardware of American imperialism.

## Union bureaucrats support war

For the BMDA officials, rather than issuing a direct call for class solidarity—for the mobilization of BIW’s nearly 7,000 total workers, for support from the broader labor movement, for an appeal to workers at Huntington Ingalls and across the defense sector—the union’s first instinct was to invoke Pete Hegseth.

“We had hoped the company took to heart the statements made by Secretary Hegseth here at GD BIW on February 9, because our membership certainly did,” said BMDA President Trent Vellella in his statement announcing the strike. The union president is appealing not to worker solidarity, but to the goodwill of a far-right cabinet secretary who visited the shipyard to praise the company and demand workers produce weapons faster.

This strategy is the logical endpoint of the nationalist orientation of the UAW apparatus, which under Shawn Fain has embraced a war economy and backed Trump’s “America First” trade policies. While claiming these reckless policies will save “American” jobs, the bureaucracy is actively helping the automakers and other employers lay off thousands.

Last year, the UAW sold out a series of struggles in the defense industry, including workers at GE Aerospace, Pratt & Whitney, Lockheed Martin and submarine builders at Electric Boat in Connecticut. This shows that the bureaucracy’s support for war abroad is connected to its defense of the profits of American corporations from any challenge by workers at home.

The Trump administration has already requested \$200 billion to pay for the war with Iran and is proposing to increase defense spending next year by 50 percent to \$1.5 trillion. As the military seeks to massively ramp up production of critical missiles, ships and other weapons, the shift to a war economy will not represent an “Arsenal of Democracy,” as Fain claims, but reducing workers to industrial slavery to pay for increasingly criminal and reckless wars abroad.

Last year, Fain traveled to Maine to deliver a keynote address at the Maine AFL-CIO Convention, where he met with Local 3999 members in advance of the upcoming contract battle. The message from Fain was one of electoral mobilization—the union has since endorsed Democratic Senate candidate Graham Platner, who has now dutifully appeared on the BIW picket line for the cameras.

Fain treated Bath Iron Works primarily as a political backdrop rather than a workplace in which hundreds of workers are locked in an unequal conflict with one of the most powerful defense contractors on earth. Where Hegseth came to serve the interests of the military-industrial complex, Fain came to serve the interests of the Democratic Party. Neither visit put a single additional dollar in the pockets of BIW workers.

Now, with the strike underway, the BMDA leadership has

reached for the most politically reactionary tool available: the statements of the very war secretary who toured the facility and sang General Dynamics’ praises. It is a plea directed to those organizing wars across the world in defense of the profits of US corporations.

The BIW strike—involving skilled designers, technicians and engineers without whom no Navy destroyer is produced—has genuine leverage. The company’s backlog of \$110 billion cannot be delivered by salaried managers and subcontractors. Yet that is precisely what General Dynamics has announced it will attempt.

But a successful struggle by workers requires a break from the strategy of the UAW apparatus, which has consistently subordinated the interests of workers to those of corporate management and Democratic Party politicians.

Workers at BIW should take matters into their own hands. The formation of a rank-and-file strike committee, independent of the union bureaucracy, would give workers direct democratic control over their own struggle. Such a committee could reach out to workers at Huntington Ingalls, at Electric Boat in Groton—where the sister Marine Draftsmen’s Association recently waged its own contract fight—and to autoworkers, steelworkers and all sections of the working class who face the same relentless assault on wages and living standards.

These committees should be linked across plants, sectors and borders through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). Only an independent, international working class network can turn local stoppages into a force capable of halting the production lines that sustain war.

The contradiction between General Dynamics’ billions in profit and the poverty wages of the workers who produce its destroyers is not an anomaly of one company or one shipyard. American capitalism in 2026 is a system that can conjure up trillions for military procurement and stock buybacks while telling workers there is nothing left for them.

Workers at BIW need to take a stand against the US-Israeli war against Iran, which is being financed and sustained by the same ruling class that demands discipline and concessions from workers while diverting billions to the military and shrinking social services at home.

*The World Socialist Web Site urges Bath Iron Works workers to form a rank-and-file strike committee and to contact the WSWS to tell us about conditions at the shipyard.*



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