Bath Iron Works naval shipyard strike betrayed as UAW subordinates workers to the war effort

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On Saturday, March 28, 2026, the United Auto Workers (UAW) bureaucracy shut down the strike of the Bath Marine Draftsmen's Association (BMDA, UAW Local 3999) at the General Dynamics naval shipyard in Maine just days after it began. This lightning-fast ratification of a four-year collective bargaining agreement at Bath Iron Works (BIW) was not a "win" for the 620 designers, engineers and technicians who walked out Monday, March 23, it was a strategic intervention by the labor bureaucracy to enforce "labor peace" at a critical bottleneck of the American war machine.

As the Trump administration escalates its criminal military campaign against Iran, the production of Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyers has been elevated to a supreme national priority, to which the material needs of the working class must be subordinated. Neither the Trump administration, General Dynamics management nor the union bureaucracy could allow this strike to continue.

While the union apparatus hailed the agreement as a "foundation for the future," the ratification was conducted under conditions of a deliberate information blackout. The UAW moved to preempt a broader mobilization by forcing a vote before the rank and file could fully digest the scale of the surrender. However, leaked terms from the membership reveal the scale of the capitulation: Annual wage increases of 10, 6, 5, and 5.5 percent, which fail to keep pace with the real-world costs of a war economy, and the regressive merging of sick and vacation time into a single paid time off (PTO) pool.

One worker commented on the r/Maine subreddit:

"The difference between the contract we went to strike over and the one we voted in was about $1,000,000 in new money and Healthcare increases are phased in.

"So about 20 cents an hour over the life of the contract if you just look at the new money and split it among the membership.

"I'm not exactly thrilled about it. It'd be 2 weeks minimum before BIW would start to take us seriously and we caved after a week. We're never getting another good contract now because they know we have no teeth."

At the outset of the strike the WSWS correctly identified the central political issue: the BMDA leadership framed its struggle not in terms of class interests of the workers they claim to represent but in terms of service to the war machine. BMDA President Trent Vellella's statement at the beginning of the strike expressing hope that General Dynamics had "taken to heart" the words of Pete Hegseth, was not a tactical error or rhetorical misstep. It was an elaboration of the bureaucracy's political orientation.

UAW President Shawn Fain has provided the essential "left" cover for the integration of the union into the Pentagon's industrial policy. By invoking the World War II "Arsenal of Democracy," Fain attempts to sanitize the current mobilization for imperialist slaughter.

Fain visited Bath in 2025 to deliver a keynote at the Maine AFL-CIO Convention, paving the political way for War Secretary Pete Hegseth's "Arsenal of Freedom" tour on February 9, 2026.

Hegseth's visit to the Bath works just weeks before the strike was part of the tour, a nationwide propaganda circuit of defense contractors conducted in early 2026. The tour's primary goal was to whip up nationalist fervor for accelerated war production.

The bureaucratic shutdown of the strike was a financial necessity for General Dynamics, which sits on a staggering $110 billion order backlog. For the ruling class, even a week-long stoppage at the "birthplace of American shipbuilding" is an intolerable threat to the

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revenue streams of permanent war.

The suppression of the BIW strike is the direct application of President Biden's July 2024 designation of the AFL-CIO as his "domestic NATO." Just as NATO is an instrument of imperialist aggression abroad, the "domestic NATO" functions as a defensive perimeter for the capitalist state at home. The AFL-CIO is tasked with suppressing the class struggle to ensure the continuity of war production.

This is why Fain kept away from the March 28 No Kings protests and remains silent as the US-Israeli bombing campaign in Iran, which has killed close to 3,500 people—including over 100 children in the targeted destruction of an all-girls school—and injured over 20,000.

A statement from Bath Iron Works (BIW) following the settlement spoke of "protecting our nation and our families," a nationalist trap designed to frame the exploitation of shipyard labor as a patriotic duty. By adopting the same language, the UAW signals that its primary function is not to represent workers, but to serve as a secondary management tier tasked with ensuring that General Dynamics meets the Navy's delivery schedules at any cost.

The union has stated that while not "all" of its initial goals were met, the deal established a better foundation for future negotiations and provided improvements that were a "win for workers." This is a lie. The statement from the union local that the settlement lays "a better contract foundation for the next negotiation" is precisely the language of an apparatus that has already accepted the framework of the next defeat.

The BIW outcome must be seen as the broader pattern of UAW treachery that the WSWS has documented extensively. Under Shawn Fain, the UAW has embraced a war economy and backed Trump's "America First" trade policies, and last year 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.

The UAW apparatus has consciously integrated itself into the management of American imperialism's industrial base. Its function is to discipline workers—to contain their struggles within limits acceptable to the corporations and the state while providing the appearance of representation. The bureaucracy's support for war abroad is directly connected to its suppression of working-class resistance to Trump and the oligarchy at home.

The WSWS called at the outset of the strike for the formation of a rank-and-file strike committee independent of the BMDA bureaucracy. The rapid settlement vindicates that call. Workers now face a four-year agreement which leaves them struggling from paycheck to paycheck under conditions where intensified war is set to further increase the economic difficulties they face.

The rank-and-file committee perspective is not simply about better tactics in contract negotiations. It is about the construction of an independent leadership of the working class—one that refuses the framework of nationalist war production and instead advances the interests of workers as an international class.

To fight back, workers must form an independent rank-and-file committee. The designers, engineers and technicians at Bath, freed from the stranglehold of the union apparatus, can be a powerful force. General Dynamics' billions in profit cannot be realized without their labor.

The task before workers at Bath Iron Works, and across the defense sector and throughout the economy, is to build the independent forms of working-class resistance that the situation demands—rank-and-file controlled organizations that connect the fight for living wages and conditions with the fight against imperialist war and demands for "national sacrifice." The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees fights to unite workers across national borders against capitalist exploitation and for the transformation of the war machine into a socially useful industry.

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