Following massive contract rejection 1,200 Bradford White workers strike in western Michigan

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Are you a striking worker at Bradford White? Fill out the form at the end of this article for information on how to build a rank-and-file committee.

A militant strike by 1,200 workers at Bradford White in Middleville in western Michigan erupted this week after two overwhelming contract rejection votes by workers at the plant that builds water heaters. The workers, who are members of United Auto Workers Local 1002, voted down the company's final offer by 96 percent.

The September 16 walkout, the first at the plant since 1978, followed more than two months of negotiations ahead of a September 1 contract expiration. While details of the negotiations have not been published, UAW Local 1002 Bargaining Chair Randy Tobias pointed to wages as the central sticking point, noting that some employees at the plant currently earn less than $21 an hour. The company is also reportedly seeking to exclude family members from health coverage if they have other insurance. In addition, workers complain of the grueling work schedule and are demanding additional time off.

Bradford White is headquartered in Ambler, Pennsylvania, in the Philadelphia suburbs. The company builds water heaters, boilers, large stainless steel storage tanks and related products. Its manufacturing is entirely US-based, employing somewhere around 2,000 workers with plants in Middleville and Niles, Michigan; Rochester, New Hampshire; Monticello, Minnesota; Uxbridge, Massachusetts; and Madison and Princeton, Wisconsin. The Middleville plant is the company's largest and the only facility on strike.

According to Local 1002 President Jessica Vasquez, the previous six-year contract was set in place before the pandemic, "Since then, inflation has hit our membership really hard." She said the company had been guilty of numerous contract violations. "A few months ago I was actually fired for telling a supervisor to read the contract. It was about to get pretty nasty, but they were required to bring me back."

Charles Adams, a worker with 27 years at Bradford White, posted on Facebook, "Our hourly salary has been extremely stagnant... we went from cost of living adjustments in our hourly wage, then cost of living bonuses. Now we're just trying to get by."

Adams said the company had tripled the size of its Middleville operation and doubled its output to more than two million units a year--all the while wages stayed flat. "We used to be the highest paying factory around," he wrote, "and now we're barely keeping up."

Amanda Williams-Smith, who worked at the plant from 2002 to 2007, said she started at "$14 something an hour" and left five years later making "$16 something." After seeing reports of what workers at the plant are currently making she was astounded. "So in the last 20 years wages have only increased $5 or $6? That is so frustrating to read." She contrasted the wage stagnation to the expansion of the plant. "It's clear profits are being made," she wrote. "It's understandable that the employees want more."

Adams noted that union members "can't use the benefits we're earning, because the cost of copays and deductibles keep it out of budget."

Workers also cited long hours of mandatory overtime. Bradford White workers have long worked mandatory Saturdays and 10- to 12-hour shifts. Adams declared, "Driving through blizzards and working in heatwaves, nobody was interested in the sacrifices we make to be here, just that we rapidly put out a superior product."

Workers reported strong support in the community, including food donations from local businesses.

Bradford White has been "employee-owned" since 1992, when it converted to a leveraged Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP) under then-CEO A. Robert Carnevale, with assets currently pegged at around $1.5 billion. The ESOP trust—not individual workers—is the legal shareholder of record. In practice, workers have no say in managing the company, which is controlled by a trustee.

The current president and CEO is R. Bruce Carnevale**,** former chief operating officer who was promoted to president and CEO in August 2018. He is also a trustee of the company's ESOP.

The "employee ownership" myth is a weapon used by management, with the support of the union officials, to hide their exploitation by the real owners, the banks and hedge funds. The $1.5 billion in ESOP assets exists precisely because wages have been frozen and benefits gutted. The "ownership" is the workers' own deferred wages converted into a mechanism for their own exploitation. The two decades of stagnant pay described by workers are the real source of the Carnevale family's wealth.

In practice, ESOP's have been used to attack workers using supposed worker ownership as a cat's paw to extract ever deeper concessions. In the case of United Airlines workers surrendered $5 billion in concessions and received worthless stock *and then* the airline dumped the pensions and the stock.

The walkout comes as gas prices in Michigan and around the US are once again spiking due to the continuing US war against Iran, putting further pressure on struggling working class households. The same government that finds unlimited funds for war--and the same corporations that reap the profits of that war--tells these workers that $21 an hour is "the best they can get."

In a brief statement on the strike Wednesday, UAW President Shawn Fain said, "Workers are fed up with being treated like second-class citizens while corporations do very well." However, he did not call for an all-out fight to win workers' demands or appeal for UAW members and other workers to rally to the support of the Bradford White strikers. Instead, he addressed a pathetic appeal to corporate management, stating, "Hopefully the company will come to their senses."

The eruption of the strike evidently took top UAW officials off guard. Fain and the rest of the apparatus are in the final days of campaigning to preserve their positions and high salaries, with only one week left for UAW members to mail in ballots.

The incumbent Fain is facing a challenge from rank-and-file Mack Trucks worker and socialist Will Lehman, who is calling for the abolition of the corrupt and scandal-ridden UAW bureaucracy and the return of power to workers on the shop floor through the building of a network of rank-and-file committees.

In recent months Fain and the UAW apparatus have rammed through a series of sellout contracts over intense rank-and-file opposition, falsely presenting them as "victories." At Nexteer Automotive in Saginaw, Michigan workers voted down three UAW-backed contracts in a row. The UAW rammed through the deal on the fourth using heavy handed intimidation tactics, including engineering the firing of Antwiane Sanders, a worker with 10-year's seniority, who criticized UAW officials at a contract rollout meeting held on company property. Workers at Dana and Bridgewater Interiors also voted down sellout agreements, only to have the UAW repackage the deals and force another vote.

One of the UAW officials who rushed down to the picket lines for a photo-op was UAW Region 1-D Steve Dawes who oversaw the sellout of the Nexteer workers.

In a message to strikers Will Lehman issued the following statement:

> I extend my solidarity to the 1,200 workers at Bradford White in Middleville, Michigan who struck on September 16 against low wages being eaten up by inflation, grueling 50-60-hour workweek schedules and health care concessions. This fight must have the support of every autoworker and be broadened to every Bradford White plant.
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> Workers have already voted down two rotten agreements by 96 percent margins while UAW officials extended the contract for two weeks to carry on further fruitless negotiations. Now workers have decided to take a decisive stand stating they are no longer going to tolerate declining real wages and abusive conditions.
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> This fight deserves the full support of every worker. But Bradford White workers should be warned: the UAW apparatus will seek to end this strike with a repackaged version of the same rejected contract, exactly as it did at Nexteer, Dana, Bridgewater, Eaton, GE Aerospace, University of California and other locations. Fain's statement of support is aimed at covering up this fact.
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> Draw the lessons of the sellouts engineered by Fain at the Big Three plants in 2023, after the bogus "Stand Up" strike that kept the majority of the workers on the job. The "victory" Fain claims the bureaucracy won was followed by mass layoffs, forced overtime, and the deaths of four workers at Stellantis and Ford. Look at what really happened at Nexteer, Dana and other auto parts plants. The UAW bureaucracy uses its control over strike authorization, strike pay, and the ratification process to sabotage militancy. The UAW will seek to withhold or delay strike pay and schedule a ratification vote on a repackaged deal on short notice without releasing the full details of its deal.
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> To prevent the UAW apparatus from repeating this scenario at Bradford White strikers should immediately establish a rank-and-file committee of their own, elected by and accountable to the workers, to publish their demands, supervise any ratification vote, and demand full strike pay. The $857 million in the strike fund is paid for by the members and it must be used to sustain those in battle not pad the salaries of corrupt UAW officials.
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> A rank-and-file committee must reach out to workers at Bradford White's other plants and to parts workers and workers at the Big Three to transform an isolated strike into a unified offensive. I am running for UAW president not to gain a position in the apparatus but to build a powerful movement from below so rank-and-file workers can take the conduct of our struggles into our own hands.