“There’s been a concession every contract since 1978”: Striking Bradford White workers in Michigan speak

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

Workers at the Bradford White plant in Middleville, Michigan are continuing to strike after walking out on September 16. The workers, members of United Auto Workers Local 1005, build residential and commercial water heaters and components at the factory, located 28 miles south of Grand Rapids. The strike, the first at the plant since 1978, followed the rejection of two contract proposals by more than 95 percent each time.

Bradford White workers have joined a growing wave of contract rejections this year, including at Nexteer, Dana and Bridgewater Interiors. Determined to overcome decades of union-backed concessions, rank-and-file workers are increasingly coming into militant struggles not just against management but the UAW apparatus itself.

A reporting team from the *World Socialist Web Site* visited the picket lines Saturday. In discussions with reporters, the striking workers said they wanted to win substantial wage increases to compensate for years of stagnant wages and more time off and to beat back management’s attempt to restrict healthcare coverage for family members and undermine safety conditions in the plant.

“There is no respect for any of our employees and there have been a lot of injuries,” one worker said. “They don’t care about anything. That’s an understatement. They have their own way of thinking. They have a maintenance program with outside companies,” he said, adding that the company was paying contractors double the rate instead of employing skilled trades workers in the plant to perform the same work.

His coworker said, “We just heard about the Smithfield Foods death (at the meatpacking plant in Monmouth, Illinois). At our plant, management makes sure they do a double safety check *after* an incident. They put in different safety precautions so they’re not liable.”

He continued, “They’ve had multiple cases against them for safety, and nothing’s really being done.” When WSWS reporters explained that workers at Nexteer Automotive in Saginaw, Michigan and other plants had formed rank-and-file committees aimed at monitoring conditions in the plant like safety, he responded, “They should! Every plant should! You know it’s do or die in there,” he said about meeting output targets, “or you get punished.”

A veteran worker told WSWS reporters, “A major thing for us is safety. You’d think they would replace our shoes when they get torn up. No, it comes out of your pocket. They gave us $9 or something shoe allowance for our boots. You can barely buy the socks when the boots are $130.

“There was one guy that literally lost half of his fingers a few years ago,” he said. Another coworker added, “The day we heard about it we had to look it up on MIOSHA (Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration). The company will get a couple thousand dollars in fines for things like that.

“They stopped the line because they got a fine on the building. I almost got hit in the head by a hoist on the line. What they need to do is PM (preventative maintenance). They don’t do it here.” He also said the company’s drive to cut health care costs had also provoked the strike.

Bradford White has been “employee-owned” since 1992, when it converted to a leveraged Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP). In practice, the employees have never had any say-so under this scheme. The current president and CEO, R. Bruce Carnevale, is a trustee of the ESOP.

“Employee ownership” scams have always been used by management and union officials to hide the real relations of exploitation. The $1.5 billion in ESOP assets exists *because* wages have been frozen and benefits gutted for two decades. The “ownership” is the workers’ own deferred wages converted into a mechanism for their own exploitation.

One worker stated, “We need healthcare and pay. We have a lot of people working really hard and they don’t care about any of our considerations. We have stock in ESOP. They based it on a formula with $3 million in five years based on performance. They don’t really give us a bonus in this place. It’s a big hassle for anything in this place.”

“There’s been a concession every contract since 1978,” a skilled worker on the picket line told the WSWS. “We’ve had

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major losses with our retirement and healthcare. When you have a family not on your insurance, what is the purpose of working here? We've lost COLA. They stripped insurance for so-called non-blood relatives. Pete Katulla (general manager and senior vice president) called us trained monkeys and said they could do our work in the plant."

Referencing Fain's boast of raising pay to $30 an hour at American Axle, a worker responded, "Yeah, you know at American Axle they said $30 by 2030. What about $30 now? There are foremen walking away with a million and a half in their pocket after 10 years. They're in their forties! For as many years as you work as a certified ASME welder, top pay rate is $35 in the state of Michigan. You have people here with close to 30 years and are underpaid. We do a lot of commercial work here that makes all the money. They're building the tanks that the Navy uses. You have a quarter of a million dollars of product going down the line."

He added, "My wife's a diabetic. She has meds that cost her $1,400 a month. So, if I didn't have insurance here, she would die otherwise. Her medicine is $5,000 for one month."

A young worker told the WSWS that the cost of living allowance was removed in the rejected contracts, replaced with a $1,000 bonus that would be taxed. Speaking on the point system instituted by the company: "People need respirators and that should be enforced for their safety. You're dealing with chemicals like silica for the tanks. They need to fix the days off. People get injured or they have a kid who is sick or hurt and need to take them to the doctor. They get one point then another if they need another day off. We had one woman before I came here that was fired for going into labor. They want you to turn crap into gold with bad machines and parts.

"If you need a press repaired you're yelled at for not running parts, but then if tanks come back crushed because the machine isn't repaired, you are in trouble either way."

A senior worker said, "With 30 by 2030, if you think about it, you're still losing money. The economy is getting worse. Every time you turn around you're paying almost $5 for gas or over $100 for groceries. Depending on your department you start at $26-$27. Then we have 10-hour shifts with every other Saturday mandated. There's overtime and then there's working all the time." Asked about automation in the plant, he said, "Automation should be a tool, not a master. You can't just have machines running without human beings here."

Several workers noted that neither UAW President Shawn Fain nor UAW-endorsed Democratic Party candidate for US Senate from Michigan Abdul El-Sayed had visited the picket line. El-Sayed and Fain were instead attending the UAW Michigan Community Action Program conference in Lansing last week and spent their time denouncing Trump for his "huge capitulation" to China for suggesting they build EV plants in the US. Fain denounced Chinese "slave labor," while workers at Bradford and tens of thousands of other workers at parts suppliers and other workplaces Fain supposedly represents face the impossible task of making ends meet on near poverty wages.

Instead of pledging to mobilize the union's resources, including its near $1 billion strike fund, to back the workers and expand the fight, Fain appealed to Bradford White management, expressing the hope that they "come to their senses."

For his part, UAW Region 1-D Director Steve Dawes went to the picket line for a brief photo-op last week. Dawes and Fain oversaw the sellout of the 10-day strike by American Axle workers in Three Rivers, Michigan earlier this summer and pushed through a snap vote on a contract that did not meet workers' demands for the restoration of past concessions. Dawes also participated in the betrayal of the Flint GM strike in 1998, the Delphi spinoff, the 2009 restructuring of GM and Chrysler, the sellout of the Eaton Aerospace strike and the sabotage of the Nexteer struggle in Saginaw, Michigan.

At Nexteer, workers voted down three UAW-backed contracts in a row, only to have the UAW ram through the deal on a fourth vote using heavy-handed intimidation, including the firing of a worker who criticized union officials at a contract meeting.

When workers were asked what they thought about the campaign of Will Lehman, a rank-and-file Mack Trucks worker and socialist who is running for UAW president against Fain, many workers expressed support for his campaign to abolish the UAW apparatus and transfer power to workers on the shop floor. Lehman has issued a statement of solidarity with the Bradford White strikers, warning them that the apparatus will repackage the rejected contract.

To prevent the UAW from repeating the Nexteer scenario at Bradford White, the strikers should immediately establish a rank-and-file committee of their own, elected by and accountable to the workers, to publish their demands, control safety, 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 to pad the salaries of corrupt UAW officials.

The committee must reach out to workers at Bradford White's other plants—Middleville is the only facility on strike—and to parts workers and Big Three workers as well as workers internationally, to transform an isolated strike into a united working class offensive.

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