

Bradford White strike entering decisive stage as workers fight decades of UAW-enforced concessions

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One week after 1,200 workers at the Bradford White water heater plant in Middleville, Michigan walked out for the first time since 1978, the struggle is entering a decisive phase. The workers rejected two company contract proposals by margins of 96 percent before striking against decades of concession contracts. They are demanding wage increases, better healthcare, stronger retirement benefits, and safety improvements.

The strike comes amid a growing wave of contract rejections at Nexteer, Dana, and Bridgewater Interiors. These militant struggles are increasingly coming into conflict not only with management but with the UAW bureaucracy itself, which has carried out concessions for decades. As one worker told the World Socialist Web Site last week, 'There's been a concession every contract since 1978.'

UAW Local 1002 President Jessica Vasquez has announced that negotiations are set to continue. In the meantime, workers are trying to survive on \$550 a week in strike pay — a fraction of their normal wages — while the UAW, which sits on a strike fund of nearly \$1 billion, refuses to commit its resources to wage an all-out fight.

'We only get \$550, it's not great,' a veteran worker said. 'The company was pushing us to 12 hours since August, preparing for this strike. You only got double-time pay if you worked 58 hours — that's how it is here. Most of us don't have pensions, so with our 401(k) they decreased the contribution from 4 percent to 3 percent. Then we only get holidays off in December, nothing else.'

'With COVID, we really got nothing — we were 'essential.' All they gave some people was \$70 for the COVID shot. Now you'd be lucky to afford any medication. For dental, we had a \$1,000 deductible; now it's up to \$1,200 just to get something cosmetic.'

One of the most explosive issue in the plant is safety. Workers described management running the factory with untrained office workers and supervisors as strikers man the

picket lines, with potentially deadly consequences.

"The plant is falling apart," he said. "There are parts of the plant where the roof leaks. I've had 50-hour weeks, and some people are up to 70 or 80 hours a week. They don't follow any standards with quality, and now they're bringing office workers and supervisors onto the floor to run the plant."

His coworker added that quality in manufacturing water heater tanks is critical, and that mistakes can be deadly. 'Within two days there were incidents,' he said. "There's a rumor that a tank exploded — all we saw was an ambulance in the parking lot. It's always possible for a tank to explode. We're basically making missiles if they're not built with precision. If the orifice that restricts the amount of gas going into the burner is incorrect, you can have a bomb.'

A younger worker described the divisive tiered pay system. "I saw your article — you mentioned starting pay at \$26 to \$27. That's for some departments; a lot of us started at \$19. We get a \$2 raise minimum here. We have seven tiers in our plant, from janitorial workers to skilled trades. If I get a bump in pay in production, the welders get less and less."

Asked whether he was aware of the UAW presidential election, including the campaign of rank-and-file Mack Trucks worker Will Lehman who is running against incumbent UAW President Shawn Fain, he said most workers weren't even aware there was an election. He expressed interest in learning more about building rank-and-file committees as called for by the Lehman campaign.

An immigrant worker spoke about ongoing line speedups at the plant. "I came to America to build a better life for myself and my family," he said. "But we're struggling to survive." After learning of Will Lehman's campaign for UAW president — which calls for building rank-and-file committees in every plant as part of an international movement — he voiced support, as did several of his coworkers.

A higher-seniority truck driver spoke about long hours and rising production demands. “Bradford White has turned into a multibillion-dollar conglomerate, with supervisors and managers retiring as millionaires within five to ten years. I’ve been here eight years. They had one person promoted to supervisor who got such a large bonus from the Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP) that he could retire a millionaire. We’re living paycheck to paycheck. Safety is poor. You had to work here ten years before you actually got vacation, and now they’re cutting it further.

“They put in a clause saying they have the right to move a trailer without calling one of us. The contract was concessionary! Last time, the contract was voted through in 2020 after we rejected three others. This time, we stood together and walked out.”

The role of the UAW bureaucracy

While the UAW apparatus headed by Shawn Fain claims it is fighting “corporate greed,” in reality Fain and UAW Region 1-D Director Steve Dawes have imposed a series of concessionary contracts. At American Axle in Three Rivers, Michigan, this summer, Dawes and Fain oversaw a sellout of the 10-day strike there, pushing through a snap vote on a contract that did not meet workers’ demands for restoration of past concessions.

At Nexteer Automotive in Saginaw, workers voted down three UAW-backed contracts in a row, only to have the UAW ram through a deal on the fourth vote using heavy-handed intimidation, according to workers. The UAW also helped engineer the firing of Antwiane Sanders, a Nexteer worker with 10 years’ seniority, after he criticized union officials at a contract meeting held inside the plant.

At the same time Bradford White workers went on strike, Fain and UAW endorsed Michigan Democratic Senate candidate Abdul El-Sayed who delivered anti-Chinese tirades at the UAW Michigan Community Action Program conference in Lansing. Pickets noted that while denouncing China and supporting trade war neither Fain nor El-Sayed could find time to visit 1,200 workers on strike only about 60 miles down the road.

Since the last strike at Bradford White in 1978, workers have seen cuts to pensions, cost-of-living adjustments, and wages, along with the creation of an Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP).

The ESOP was launched in 1992 as the financing structure Bradford White management chose for their buyout of the company from the Australian conglomerate that then owned it. Formally called the Bradford White Corporation Employee Stock Ownership Plan and Trust Agreement, the plan was created as a retirement vehicle holding employer securities. Billed as “employee ownership,” in reality the ESOP functioned as a mechanism of risk transfer —

controlled by a trustee, then-CEO Robert Carnevale — with workers having no say in managing the company. The \$1.5 billion in ESOP assets are the product of wage freezes and benefit cuts negotiated by the UAW in previous contracts.

Similar ESOP arrangements, such as at United Airlines, have led to workers being forced into round after round of concessions while creditors looted company assets. Bankruptcy proceedings followed, leaving workers without pensions and holding worthless stock.

Bradford White workers have already shown their determination to fight. The question now is how to win. Workers must draw the lessons of the sellouts at American Axle and Nexteer imposed by the UAW bureaucracy and take the fight into their own hands

The Bradford White strikers should immediately establish a rank-and-file committee of their own, elected by and accountable to the workers, to:

- Publish the workers’ own demands - This should include rank and file control over safety, the abolition of the tier system and an immediate pay increase to \$35 an hour.
- Elect a rank-and-file bargaining committee to oversee contract negotiations.
- Demand full strike pay from day one, paid out of the nearly \$1 billion strike fund that belongs to the members.
- Refuse any ratification vote unless the full contract text is released and workers are given adequate time to read and debate it.

The committee must reach out to workers at Bradford White’s other plants — in Rochester, New Hampshire, Niles, Michigan, and elsewhere — to prevent scab production, and to workers at Nexteer, Dana, Bridgewater, and the Big Three, to transform an isolated strike into a united offensive of the working class.



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