

Build the Bradford White Rank-and-File Committee! Take the strike out of the hands of the UAW bureaucracy

Bradford White strikers reject third sellout deal by nearly 62 percent

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Take up the fight for rank-and-file control! To join a rank-and-file committee, or for help founding one, fill out the form below.

Defying threats by union officials, striking workers at Bradford White in Middletown, Michigan, have rejected a third pro-company tentative agreement (TA) by nearly 62 percent. The first two were rejected by 96 percent.

The 1,200 workers who build water heaters have been on strike since September 16. Since then, the United Auto Workers (UAW) has isolated the strike while management has sought to restart production using strikebreakers.

A senior worker with more than 20 years at the plant told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the “no” vote would likely have been larger, but workers are being squeezed by \$550 weekly strike pay and rely on overtime to survive. He said he told coworkers that “now is the chance to get back what they’ve lost over decades, respectable pay and work conditions.”

This was a vote of no confidence in the conduct of the strike by the UAW, which has worked with management to impose concessions through open threats.

“They’re [UAW officials] saying if we continue to strike without the union it’s a ‘wildcat’ strike and we would lose our jobs,” one worker said. The apparatus is threatening to seize the meager strike pay workers receive and leave them out on their own.

This points to the need for workers to take the conduct of the strike into their own hands with a rank-and-file committee, to make preparations to expand the strike to other Bradford White facilities and to link up with workers across the US and internationally.

Under the rejected deal, the lowest-paid workers would receive an immediate raise of \$1.96 an hour, then 50 cents an hour each year for five years, topping out at \$25.25. Other pay grades would receive similar increases. Skilled

trades workers would receive an immediate raise of more than \$6 an hour, then 70 to 75 cents annually.

With starting wages as low as \$18.25 an hour, a \$2 hourly raise will leave workers in poverty.

The company and the UAW offset the first-year raises by slashing the employer 401(k) match from 4.5 percent to 3 percent. Other workers mentioned the issue of adequate vacation time.

To sell the contract, the UAW tried to exploit workers’ desperation on \$550 weekly strike pay by adding taxable ratification bonuses of \$1,000 to \$2,000, depending on years of service.

A major issue for workers was the new contract’s expansion of temporary workers. The UAW has allowed management to use temporary workers without limit at auto assembly and parts plants. Temp labor lets management cut costs and divide workers, creating a subclass with few rights and lower pay and benefits.

At the Big Three automakers, Dana, American Axle, Cornell and Allison Transmission, the UAW claimed it was ending tiers, only to expand “in-progression” pay tracks for new hires.

Threats and pressure from the UAW

The threat by UAW officials to abandon the strike and allow management to fire the workers expresses their role as little more than labor police for management.

A worker said the union is failing its members. Referring to the General Motors layoffs, he said: “The UAW doesn’t protect its workers. Continued layoffs when they had a promise with the new contract to protect their jobs is

inexcusable.”

He described how the union responded to the company’s “final offer”: “We had one of the safety committee members talk to us saying they got a phone call from Bradford White HR that this is the absolute final offer. One of the committee people said that we would be out of a job, and they immediately caved to corporate pressure. Everyone started arguing and yelling that the union is letting us down.” He added: “I haven’t heard anything from the [International] UAW yet, only the bargaining committee. They said they fully stand by it.”

Before the vote, he had said: “I think if this contract is forced through by the UAW, then a lot of pissed off people are going to be very open to a rank-and-file style committee.”

Another worker, who was unsure why the union had brought back an identical “sellout” agreement, agreed that the UAW apparatus lines up with American corporations in the global struggle for profits and market share. Whether under Democrats or Republicans in the White House, its allegiance has been not to defending workers’ living standards but to economic nationalism and militarism.

This was reflected in the UAW election, in which UAW President Shawn Fain was reelected with the backing of only 6 percent of eligible members. More than 90 percent did not vote. Only 65 out of 1,200 cast ballots at Bradford White, less than 6 percent. That was a mass repudiation of the apparatus, not a “mandate” as the corporate press declared

A worker, Tommy, posted on Facebook following the vote: “If the wage was reflecting how they feel about us workers (it) just means they don’t care about their employees ... I know we are not GM, Ford or Anybody like American Axle but we do provide some of the best water heaters in the United States. I feel like they can come up a little more like \$3.00 increase instead of \$2.00 and .50-.60 cent raise every year. With [costs] rising we should be able to survive without having to work 60+ hours a week.”

Another remarked on the paltry retirement plan: “(T)he union employees have no retirement except for 401(k) and all 3% of that is your own money going in your 401(k). The company will only match 3% up to a certain dollar which is not much there is no retirement. They got rid of that four contracts ago. It is the nonunion people that retire from there with millions of dollars.”

An American Axle worker voiced their support, posting: “Hold the line!! Local 2093 should have continued holding the line and not accepted the tentative agreement we did. Still no work/life balance. 7 days a wk critical, 10 hr shifts. I stand with you all.”

The stand taken by Bradford White workers is part of a global wave of class struggle, which also includes the mass

protests in France, driven by rising inequality, the high cost of living and unpopular wars whose costs are being borne by the working class.

One worker told the WSWs: “I think the failures of the Trump administration have a big part in why these guys are fed up.” He pointed in particular to “what’s going on in the Middle East right now. Or are they sick of taxpayer money going to their military industrial complex?”

Workers at Bradford White should review the lessons of the American Axle, Dana and Nexteer struggles. Nexteer workers rejected three sellout contracts and built a committee independent of the apparatus and company.

The Nexteer rank-and-file committee demands mirror what Bradford White workers are demanding. The central principle is that workers have rejected three pro-company UAW agreements: “Now we must become the authority.” In response to this call, one worker responded: “Well said. I spent 30 years there [Bradford White] and it’s gone downhill for the whole time I was there.”

A rank-and-file committee’s power comes from the shop floor. As Will Lehman, a Mack Trucks worker and socialist candidate for UAW president, has explained, the purpose of a rank-and-file committee is to organize workers themselves as an independent power—to prepare them to fight not only the company but the pro-corporate union apparatus.

Bradford White workers must immediately make themselves the authority and establish a rank-and-file committee, elected by and accountable to the workers, with all negotiations livestreamed and overseen by the rank and file:

- Publish the workers’ own demands, including rank-and-file control over safety, the abolition of the tier system, and an immediate pay increase to \$35 an hour.
- Demand \$1,000 weekly strike pay, backdated from day one, paid out of the nearly \$1 billion strike fund that belongs to the members.
- Reach out to workers at Bradford White’s other plants and the Big Three to expand the strike.



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