# “Our union is for the company not the members”: UAW rams through Bradford White contract, ending 47-day strike in Michigan

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*Are you a Bradford White worker? Fill out the form at the end of the article for information on joining the rank-and-file committee.*

The United Auto Workers shut down the 47-day strike by nearly 1,300 workers at water heater manufacturer Bradford White in Middleville, Michigan, after claiming that workers ratified the company’s “last, best and final” offer by 58.6 percent to 40.1 percent on Sunday. The deal is virtually identical to the one workers rejected by 62 percent a week earlier.

The most significant aspect of the vote is that more than 40 percent of the members still rejected the deal despite the campaign of strong-arming and blackmail by the UAW apparatus. The bureaucracy isolated the strikers for nearly seven weeks, starved them on $550 a week in strike pay and made it clear it would do nothing to oppose management’s threats to replace strikers with scabs if the walkout continued. On the eve of the ratification vote, Local 1002 President Jessica Vazquez told local media that management could replace her members “with minimal training” of strikebreakers.

From the beginning, the UAW International and Local 1002 never wanted a strike. After the six-year contract expired on September 1, union officials extended it for 15 days and only authorized a walkout, the first at the plant since 1978, after workers voted down the first agreement by 96 percent.

UAW President Shawn Fain, Region 1D Director Scott Zuckschwerdt and Local 1002 officials set out to wear down the strikers and forced them to vote on the same contract until they “got it right.” But strikers rejected the next two deals by 95 and 62 percent respectively.

Summing up the contempt the bureaucracy for the rank and file, Local 1002 Health and Safety committeeman Rick Beebe told WSWS reporters that workers “expect instant gratification” but would have to go through the “process.” After workers rejected the UAW-backed deal by 62 percent on October 23, the UAW bureaucracy did not even bother to pretend it would fight for anything better. Instead, it scheduled a new vote for Sunday, November 1, with Beebe telling the local media, “Negotiations, at this point, have stopped. We’ll go for another vote this Sunday. If it’s a ‘yes,’ we’re back inside on Wednesday [November 4].”

Meanwhile, the UAW bureaucracy, which is sitting on top of a nearly $1 billion strike fund paid for by workers’ dues money, strung out Bradford White workers out on a starvation level strike benefits. This forced many to seek other jobs or set up gofundme pages to raise money for their mortgages and other living expenses. Exploiting this, the UAW and the company added a $250 “signing bonus” for newly hired employees and $500 for everyone else to get the final deal through.

Describing this process, a young worker told the WSWS a “majority of the people who voted yes last vote, mainly did that because they want to go back to work even though they disagree with the contract. This is a reason they’re making us vote again thinking they’ll get more people to vote yes.” Asked whether conditions would worsen if the contract passed, he said, “Exactly, in our case we are striking more for insurance rather than pay.”

Another worker said, “Bradford White is buying up six companies. Over the last 30 years we’ve lost COLA, retiree insurance and our pensions, replaced with a 401(k). This contract gives us barely a $2 raise. I started at $13 an hour in the 1990s. Under this deal, workers will be at $26.25 by 2031.”

With starting wages before the strike as low as $18.25 an hour, the $2 hourly raise in the first year will leave workers in poverty. The lowest-paid workers will receive an immediate raise of $1.96 an hour, then 50 cents an hour each

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year for five years, topping out at $25.25. Current workers will get slightly more. The company has offset the cost of first-year raises by slashing the employer 401(k) match from 4.5 percent to 3 percent.

"The agreement provides meaningful wage increases and valuable benefits for our employees and their families, upholding our commitment to being a leading manufacturing employer in West Michigan," a spokesperson for Bradford White boasted in a statement. "We look forward to welcoming our team back to the plant."

Workers also took the question of communication into their own hands, setting up a Facebook page described as a place for Bradford White union workers to post freely "without being silenced by our corrupt committee."

On it, workers voiced what they thought of the leadership. "Our union is for the company not the union members," one wrote. Another pointed out that the wealth behind the Bradford White ESOP program was created by the workers but would go to management, while the bargaining committee should be working for the workers. "They're done fighting for us, that much is apparent," the worker wrote. After the agreement was rammed through, one worker summed up the attitude of the rank and file to the UAW apparatus, posting, "Useless union."

For nearly seven weeks, Bradford White workers fought the company's strikebreaking operation, overseen by the Barry County Sheriff's Office, led by the notorious fascist sheriff Dar Leaf. As for the UAW bureaucracy, its chief concern was campaigning for Democratic Party candidates in the midterm elections in order to deepen its collaboration with the employers to suppress opposition to job cuts, speed up and the transition to a war time economy.

During the course of the struggle, the most class-conscious and militant workers sought to provide direction and leadership to the struggle by forming the Bradford White Rank-and-File Committee.

In a statement calling for a "no" vote, the committee wrote:

> Any organization that actually defended workers would tell management what it could do with its 'final offer.' It would mobilize thousands of UAW members to defend these picket lines and use the strike fund, our money approaching $1 billion, to hold the line.
>
> The UAW is doing the opposite. It is bringing back essentially the same agreement we rejected, and it is helping management stick a gun to our heads by making clear it will do nothing to stop management from replacing us. That is not representation. That is labor police work for management."

The committee said that the UAW bureaucracy was following the same playbook as it had during the 2023 Mack Trucks strike when Fain brought back a "last, best and final" offer virtually identical to one workers had rejected by 73 percent.

Mack Trucks worker Will Lehman, who ran against Fain in 2022 and 2026, opposed that sellout and fought for an all-out walkout by every Mack Trucks and Detroit Three autoworkers. The day after the Bradford White strike began, Lehman issued a statement calling for all UAW members to support the walkout.

To prevent the sabotage of the UAW apparatus, Lehman called on Bradford White strikers to "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.

He added:

> 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.

The struggle at Bradford White is far from over. In the coming weeks workers will be thrust into struggle over job cuts, unsafe conditions and the further erosion of their incomes due to wartime inflation and the sellout contract.

The Bradford White Rank-and-File Committee must be expanded and through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) linked up with workers at Nexteer, Dakkota, Dana, American Axle and the Detroit Three autoworkers and with workers across other industries in the US and internationally.

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