

Bath shipyard workers return to work after 63-day strike

By Shannon Jones
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After 63 days on strike, workers at the Bath Iron Works (BIW) north of Portland, Maine have begun returning to the job after voting to approve a new three-year contract with the shipyard, which contracts with the US Navy.

International Association of Machinists (IAM) Local S6 said workers voted by an 87 percent margin in favor of the deal, which reportedly includes provisions allowing management to continue hiring contract workers who already make up a considerable portion of the workforce. In addition, the deal permits management to retain scab subcontractors hired during the walkout and does not contain an amnesty for workers facing discipline for alleged picket line infractions.

Following the vote, management expressed its approval declaring it was pleased it could “get back to the important work of building ships on schedule for the US Navy.

“This contract reflects the commitment of all BIW employees to improve schedule performance, and the economic package ensures that manufacturing careers at BIW continue to be among the very best in Maine. As we move forward to deliver on our commitments to the U.S. Navy and meet our obligations as part of this nation’s critical infrastructure, we must do so together, on time, every time.”

The settlement calls for a three percent annual wage increase, the same offer the company had on the table when workers first walked out. This minimal raise will at best barely keep up with inflation while doing nothing to restore previous lost wages.

The central issue in the strike was the demand by management for contract changes to allow the expanded hiring of subcontract workers and eviscerate work rules to allow it to shift workers from job to job

as needed. Full details of the settlement have not been made public. The IAM claimed the deal protected seniority rights and subcontracting language. The union agreed to meet with management to discuss how to catch up on a more than six-month backlog of work.

Despite the IAM’s hollow claims of victory, the fact that BIW will retain subcontractors hired during the strike signifies that the company is well on the way to achieving its goal of a largely low wage workforce serving entirely at the whim of management. Currently there are 6,800 workers at the shipyard, but only 4,300 were on strike.

Both President Trump and Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden hailed the deal. Biden declared in a statement, “In standing up for what is right, the Local S6 members showed the power of their collective voice and the power of unions to ensure workers get a fair return for their work.”

Earlier this month Trump tweeted, “CONGRATS to General Dynamic’s Bath Iron Works & Local S6 on reaching a tentative agreement after the long strike. GD builds GREAT Arleigh-Burke destroyers. Super boost for Maine Economy. Glad to have helped. I’ve done a lot for Maine!”

Bath Iron Works is owned by the highly profitable defense contractor General Dynamics, which also operates a shipyard in Norfolk, Virginia. From the start of the strike BIW behaved in a provocative manner, keeping operations going by hiring hundreds of subcontractors and cutting off health benefits to strikers in the midst of the pandemic even as reports surfaced of more workers being infected.

The entire strategy of the IAM was based on nationalist and militarist appeals to Congress and the Trump administration to broker a settlement in the name of naval preparedness.

The IAM did everything possible to keep the strike isolated, scandalously not even calling for support from sister IAM locals at the shipyard which continued to send their members to work, acting essentially as strikebreakers. The IAM executives' overriding concern was to prevent the determined stand of shipyard workers from linking up with the struggles of other sections of the working class such as autoworkers and teachers.

The union limited pickets to token levels, and strikers were told not to impede picket line crossers in any way or engage them in conversations. It made no attempt to rally support from other sections of the working class, including shipyard workers in Newport News, Virginia or the Ingalls shipyards in Pascagoula, Mississippi, where there have been major recent COVID-19 outbreaks. BIW workers walked out in March after a worker contracted the virus, but management refused to shut down for quarantine or cleaning.

The last strike at the shipyard was in 2000 and lasted 55 days. During that strike, workers rejected two contract offers submitted by the union before reluctantly voting to accept a settlement by a 65 percent margin. In 2015, workers at the shipyard agreed to concessions after being told by the IAM and management that the sacrifice was necessary to help land a new US Coast Guard contract. The work never materialized, but the concessions stayed in place.

In 1994, the IAM agreed to a "groundbreaking" contract at the Bath shipyard allowing cross-training of workers under a formula called a "High Performance Work Organization." The arrangement eliminated a host of work rules and codified union-management collaboration. Then President Bill Clinton celebrated the deal along with IAM leaders in a Labor Day rally in Bath marking the start of the campaign for the November Congressional elections.

Over the years General Dynamics has used its power as one of Maine's largest employers to extort large tax concessions from the state. That includes a \$45 million tax handout by the Maine legislature in 2019. That same year General Dynamics booked \$3.5 billion in profits.

Despite the large backlog of work on Navy destroyers crucial to US war plans, both General Dynamics and the Trump administration were apparently willing to tolerate a protracted strike for the sake of disciplining

workers. In this they relied at every step on the IAM.

The *World Socialist Web Site* urges workers to draw the lessons of this experience. The IAM's opposition to any broadening of the strike and its attempt to palm off its miserable capitulation as a victory is a product of the bankruptcy of the union's procapitalist and nationalist program. Workers need new rank-and-file organizations of struggle, linking workers across industries and national boundaries. This must be connected with the development of an independent political movement of the working class aimed at placing the productive forces of society under the democratic ownership and control of the working class and converting the war industries into socially productive operations.

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