

USW says its sellout contract was passed at key naval shipyard in Newport News, Virginia

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Just before 6:00 a.m. Tuesday, the president of United Steelworkers Local 8888 sent an email to members announcing ratification of a sellout contract at Newport News Shipbuilding (NNS) in Newport News, Virginia. NNS is the largest industrial employer in Virginia, producing aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines for the United States Navy, and is a subsidiary of one of the nation's largest defense firms, Huntington Ingalls Industries.

Scarcely concealing his delight, Charles Spivey titled the email, "Contract Ratified!" He called the vote "decisive" and claimed that the contract—essentially unchanged from a previous version, which rank-and-file workers rejected last November by more than a 2-to-1 margin—had passed this time with 3,678 voting for and 533 against. Even if true—and there is widespread skepticism over the accuracy of the vote count—the USW pushed its deal through with the votes of barely a third of its 10,000 members in the shipyard.

In a "highlights" document sent to the membership on February 3, the union fraudulently claimed that the "agreement has no concessions or givebacks and provides financial improvements, as well as improvements in pensions and benefits and other provisions." It added, "We are convinced that this agreement represents the best path forward and strongly encourage you to ratify it."

Spivey boasted that the five-year agreement "contains over \$22,000 in new money based on a 40-hour week." However, this figure fails to keep up with soaring inflation, now at 7.5 percent. On top of this, the contract includes out-of-pocket health care premium increases of 5 percent in 2024, 2025 and 2026. In other words, this was a "win" for everyone—shareholders, union bureaucrats and war-mongering politicians—except the workers.

Underscoring the nexus of big business, the USW and the Democratic Party, Congressman Bobby Scott celebrated the news of a deal, saying, "I congratulate

USW Local 8888 President Spivey and Newport News Shipbuilding President Boykin on coming together and reaching a hard-fought agreement for the benefit of our nation's best shipbuilders. As the representative of Newport News and the Chairman of the House Committee on Education and Labor, I was very pleased to see USW Local 8888 ratify a new collective bargaining agreement that will cover over 10,000 workers at Newport News Shipbuilding. This agreement will mean that our shipbuilders will be well-compensated and protected on the job. Newport News Shipbuilding remains a critical piece of the Hampton Roads economy and integral to our Navy and national security."

Shipyard workers who spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* had a different assessment. One relatively new worker said, "I heard many people say today 'there's no way [the vote count was accurate] but how do we prove it?'" She added that the wage increases were "not worth anything."

"The contract is a shameful excuse for 'collective bargaining,' and is pretty similar to the contract initially proposed last year that was voted down. And somehow this ballot showed overwhelming support," another worker said sarcastically.

"Our almighty union fought 'tooth and nail' for a contract that at this rate won't even help with astonishing gas prices, the cost of groceries skyrocketing, the 13-18% rent increases in this area. It's piss poor to say the least."

Angry workers also took to the union local's Facebook page expressing disgust at the contract terms and the voting process.

"Y'all should be ashamed of yourself. Y'all sold us out," commented one worker. "BS contract! It was rigged!" said another.

One worker quipped, "Please post the address we are to mail our resignation notice to. I'll get my raise by not paying you weekly dues." Another added, "I'm currently

thinking about making t-shirts.... Screwed in '22.”

Another asked, “Do they really think we’re all stupid enough not to realize that this vote was rigged?”

Suspicious of vote fraud are indeed warranted. On November 16, the membership rejected the initial tentative agreement by 1,312 to 684. Rather than calling the workers out on strike after the resounding defeat of their sellout agreement, the USW kept workers on the job for months without a new contract to guarantee corporate profitability and military readiness.

Reeling from the vote and nervous about the size of a union rally on November 20, Local 8888 President Spivey tried to intimidate workers in a public letter discouraging strike action, saying, “I’ve been through the dark days of a strike against the company. It wasn’t pretty. It broke up marriages and split families.”

By December 7, Spivey was telling shipbuilders that members should be ready for a “bruising fight ahead” with “economic hardship that comes with missing paychecks and scrambling to make ends meet.” That is to say that the workers, and not the company, should be afraid of a strike!

A December 10 post on Local 8888’s Facebook page warned workers to “prepare yourself and protect your family financially,” making it clear they would get little or nothing from the USW’s giant “Strike and Defense Fund.” Then on December 16, the union threw a curious rally whose start time, end time and location were concealed and changed with the goal of dampening turnout and depressing morale.

Since the new tentative agreement emerged in late January, Spivey and the Local 8888 leadership have relentlessly promoted the pro-company deal in videos, social media posts and emails to members.

After seeing the USW block strike action, drag out the process for months, threaten to starve workers if they struck, and dish out nothing but lies and intimidation, the bulk of workers issued a vote of no confidence by abstaining, while others reluctantly voted for the deal, knowing the USW would not bring back anything better.

During this period, Spivey and his co-conspirators in the unions at Ingalls Shipbuilding in Pascagoula, Mississippi undermined any possibility of a joint action at the two facilities. At the same time, the USW kept 30,000 oil refinery and petrochemical workers on the job for more than three weeks after the expiration of their February 1 contract, and then announced a deal, just days after USW President Tom Conway met with President Biden and officials from the defense and energy

departments. Conway blocked a strike and agreed to a deal, which he boasted did not add to “inflationary pressures,” as part of the union’s support for Biden’s war preparations against Russia.

While the Russian invasion of Ukraine is opposed, within the working class there is no support for a further military escalation by the US and NATO, which could rapidly expand into a world war fought with nuclear weapons. Under conditions of the relentless propaganda for war from both parties and the media, the growth of opposition among defense industry workers is seen as particularly dangerous to the Biden administration and its stooges in the trade union apparatus. In addition to the shipbuilding workers in Virginia and Mississippi, there are ongoing struggles by other defense workers.

Nearly 300 workers at Collins Aerospace wheel and brake division in Troy, Ohio, were locked out on February 21 after they rejected the company’s “last, best and final offer” by a margin of 230 to 37. The workers, who are members of the United Auto Workers (UAW), build wheels and brakes for a number of commercial and military planes, including the F-16 Fighting Falcon, U-2 Dragon Lady and LM-100J. Collins Aerospace is a subsidiary of Raytheon Technologies, a giant aerospace, defense and intelligence conglomerate.

Last Friday, over 360 workers at the Eaton-Cobham Mission Systems manufacturing facility in Davenport, Iowa, voted down by 97 percent a second contract offer negotiated by the company and the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAMW) Locals 388 and 1191.

In each case, workers are defying the demands by the corporations, the two big business parties and the unions for ever-greater sacrifice to boost the income of the giant corporations, which are profiteering from war.



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