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Strikers feel pressure; options for union dwindle at Vought

BYLINE: Wendy Lee

After striking for 14 weeks, more than 840 Vought Aircraft Industries' union workers say they will continue to seek a better contract, despite the company's announcement this week that it will hire permanent replacements for them.

But the union's options are few, experts say, especially at a time when unemployment is rising and a troubled economy continues to wreak havoc on businesses.

"Since they went on strike, (the union) used their nuclear weapon," said **Mark Johnson**, president of Grapevine, Texas-based **ERISA Benefits Consulting Inc.**

"The company, by hiring permanent replacements, is telling the union take it or leave it."

Since the strike began, about 8 percent of the union's prior 940 members have crossed picket lines to continue working, angering those who remain on strike.

More than two-thirds of the members voted in favor of the strike in September over objections to proposed changes to pension and health-care benefits, said Mike Worrell, president of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers Local Lodge 735.

Worrell said the union plans to continue to negotiate with Vought Aircraft, and a meeting between the two sides is scheduled for Jan. 13. Vought's Nashville plant builds wings and tail sections for military, commercial and general-aviation aircraft.

Analysts said the odds have shifted in favor of the company.

Johnson said at this point, the union has only three options: to hold firm, accept Vought's last offer, or come up with a compromise the company would accept. But by holding firm, the union will face the possibility of losing jobs to the permanent replacements, he said.

"Management has raised the stakes considerably, and given the economic climate, certainly the union is not in a good position," Johnson said.

Striker James Stewart, 52, a plant maintenance worker, said he plans to stand in solidarity with the union as long as he can before he has to find another job, and he vowed that he would never cross the picket line to go back to work.

"I will lose my house, I will lose everything; I will not be a scab," Stewart said. "We go out together, we go back in together."

401(k) plan didn't fly

The September proposal that union workers turned down would have given them a 75-cent hourly raise in the first year and 50 cents in each of the next two years, along with a \$3,000 bonus.

Workers on average earn about \$20 an hour.

But the union disagreed with proposed changes to the company's pension and plans to raise the workers' health-care premiums and medical co-pays.

Under the proposed contract that was voted down in September, workers with fewer than 16 years of service would have been switched from a pension to a 401(k) plan and an annual contribution from the company to each worker's personal retirement account. They would have retained the pension amounts they earned to date.

The union turned down another company proposal in November that would have outsourced about 100 union jobs, among other changes.

"In general, all the changes are to bring (the contract) in line with what we do with other plants," Vought spokeswoman Lynne Warne said.

The company has brought about 500 contractors and 80 employees from other Vought sites to work at the plant, Warne said. The temporary workers will be eligible to apply for permanent positions, she said.

Ads for the permanent positions will be posted in the near future, but the company has begun receiving resumes, Warne said.

"We need to continue to operate our business, and we just can't do it with the temporary work force anymore," she said.

Steve Davis, vice president and general manager of Vought's commercial aerostructures division, recently sent out letters encouraging the striking workers to "return to work immediately because the company will now seek permanent replacements for you in order to continue to operate its business."

The company is "playing the ultimate trump card, the biggest threat that you can make to a worker," said Richard Hurd, a Cornell University professor of industrial and labor relations. "The company's goal is to persuade more people to cross the picket line. The union is put into a difficult decision. Do they recommend they accept the final offer or call the company's bluff?"

Meanwhile, the union has filed several complaints with the National Labor Relations Board regarding issues brought up by workers about supervisors influencing their votes on the strike and alleged misinformation on the company's Web site, among other issues, Worrell said. Those complaints are still being reviewed.

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