Fight Ontario Caterpillar plant closure! Unite North American workers against wage-cutting!

Keith Jones
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Caterpillar's decision to close its London, Ontario locomotive plant exemplifies the ruthlessness of big business and the urgency of workers in North America and around the world uniting their struggles against the corporate offensive on jobs, wages and workers' rights.

On New Year's Day, Caterpillar subsidiary Electro-Motive Diesel (EMD) locked out 465 production workers at the London plant after they rejected massive contract concessions, including a 55 percent wage cut that would reduce wages to as little as $16 per hour. The company also demanded the elimination of the pension plan.

Last Friday, a week after Caterpillar reported that it had made a record $4.9 billion profit in 2011, the company announced it was transforming the lockout into a plant closure. The shutdown will devastate London, a southwestern Ontario manufacturing center that already has an official unemployment rate of close to 10 percent.

Caterpillar is expected to move the final locomotive assembly operations carried out at the London plant to a new facility in Muncie, Indiana, where workers are paid as little as $12.50 per hour. On Saturday, thousands of unemployed workers attended a Caterpillar "jobs fair" in Muncie. Another possible site is EMD's flagship plant in Lagrange, Illinois, where the UAW has helped impose a series of concessions contracts reducing wages to levels near those Caterpillar sought to impose at its London facility.

The Canadian Auto Workers union (CAW), the bargaining representative of the London EMD workers, has meekly accepted the plant shutdown. On Tuesday, it began talks with the company on a plant closure agreement.

The London workers should reject the false choice given them by Caterpillar and accepted by the CAW—impoverishment through wage cuts or impoverishment through unemployment. They should occupy the plant and appeal to workers across North America to join them in a struggle against *all* concessions and in defence of *all* jobs.

There is no doubt such action would win massive support. Caterpillar's actions have outraged and alarmed workers on both sides of the border. Masses of workers can readily recognize that if Caterpillar is not opposed and defeated, its action will only embolden other corporations to employ similar blackmail tactics.

But if such a worker counter-offensive is to be successful, it must be based on a sober appraisal of the situation that confronts the working class in North America and around the world.

Everywhere workers are under concerted attack, with big business using the global economic crisis and threat of unemployment to demand fresh wage and benefit cuts and speed-up. With the unions virtually abandoning the strike weapon, the employers have been encouraged to take the offensive with lockouts. The same day that Caterpillar locked out the London locomotive workers, Rio Tinto Alcan locked out 750 workers at its Alma, Quebec smelter who rejected its plan to increase the use of contract workers who are paid half the regular wage. Cooper Tire, another transnational, has locked out more than a thousand workers at its Findlay, Ohio plant since late November because they oppose implementation of a wage-cutting piecework system.

The unions are not simply impotent before this class war assault. These nationally-based, pro-capitalist

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organizations are complicit in it.

For the past three decades, the unions have imposed concessions and speed up in the name of “saving jobs,” while helping impose successive corporate restructurings that have resulted in the destruction of millions of manufacturing jobs across North America. They have systematically sabotaged any joint struggle of Canadian and US workers.

If Caterpillar can now pit workers in Illinois and Indiana against those in Canada, driving down the living standards of all workers, it is the ruinous outcome of the unions’ suppression of the class struggle and promotion of virulent nationalism.

Since they split the UAW along national lines in 1985-86, the rival Canadian and US union apparatuses have competed with each other to offer the auto makers themost”competitive”—i.e.,exploited—workforce.With their harangues about defending respectively “Canadian” or “American jobs,” they have justified their collusion with the auto makers in imposing concessions and speed up while inciting animosity between Canadian and US workers. In this way they have facilitated the auto makers’ whipsawing attacks.

It is not accidental that among those hailing Caterpillar’s Muncie’s “jobs fair” was Mike Jones, a former top official of UAW Local 499 at the now shuttered Muncie Chevrolet plant and current Democratic Party Delaware County Council member.

The UAW openly supports the Obama administration’s industrial policy, which seeks to “in-source” jobs to the US based on the impoverishment of US workers through union-imposed wage cuts and the devaluation of the dollar.

The CAW’s policy is no different. Like the UAW, it has played a pivotal role in the restructuring of the auto industry to make it once again a source of lucrative profits for investors. In 2009, it joined hands with the Obama administration and Canada’s Conservative government to reopen contracts at GM and Chrysler so as to impose wage and benefit cuts totaling $19 per hour. Going beyond the UAW, the CAW imposed the same cuts on Ford Canada workers.

For the CAW there was never any question of countering Caterpillar’s blackmail by seeking to mobilize US Caterpillar workers for a joint struggle. Its quick acceptance of the closure of the London plant underscores that it upholds the capitalists’ dictatorship over socioeconomic life and subordination of the most basic needs of working people to the profits of a few.

To defend their jobs and wages and mount a struggle that meets the transnationals with the strength of the international working class, workers must break organizationally and politically from the unions. Rank-and-file committees should be organized in opposition to and independent of the CAW, UAW and other union apparatuses so as to unite workers internationally, organize militant industrial action, including occupations and strikes, against all concessions and job cuts, and develop an independent political movement of the working class to fight for socialism. In answer to the demands of big business and their governments that working people pay for the capitalist crisis through wage cuts and the destruction of social benefits and public services, workers should advance a program to radically reorganize economic life through the establishment of workers’ governments committed to placing the transnationals and banks under public ownership and the democratic control of the working class.

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