Illinois Caterpillar strike enters fourth week

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Nearly 800 workers at a Caterpillar plant near Joliet, Illinois, are entering the fourth week of their strike against company demands for a six-year contract that would sharply reduce their pay and erode working conditions.

Under the earthmoving equipment giant's "last and final offer," out-of-pocket health care costs would rise two-and-a-half times, pensions would be frozen, and those nearing retirement would have to leave the company in a year to avoid losing benefits. Management would gain increased ability to change workers' shifts and job duties, as well as arbitrarily discipline workers. Over the six-year contract, there would be no cost-of-living increases, leading to a de facto wage cut of 15-20 percent for workers.

Last Thursday, the International Association of Machinists (IAM), which bargains for workers at the plant, met with representatives from CAT and a federal mediator with no progress reported in the talks.

Workers on the picket line said CAT has allocated substantial resources to maintain production during the strike. Strikebreakers are being bussed in from surrounding states, put up in hotels, given free meals, and being paid $2,500 a week.

Striking employees underwent the humiliation of training many of their replacements months ago, showing them in one week how to carry out work that would normally take several weeks to safely understand. Workers maintaining the round-the-clock picket outside the factory have seen at least two ambulances leave the property, one carrying a strikebreaker hit by a portion of an overhead crane while on the job.

Workers spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about their struggle. Lisa hired on just six months before the strike. She said, "When I was a kid your parents could support a family of four comfortably on one income; now, two parents can't even do that. You're living from paycheck to paycheck. Pay has not kept up with the cost of living. When I was younger I always heard the saying 'the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.' Now I know—that's the truth."

She continued, "The majority of the US is working class, including nonindustrial jobs, like health care, where more and more nurses have to work 12-hour shifts. The long hours can impact on performance. In every industry workers are getting the shaft. It's not just here; they move production to other countries, and those workers get crapped on too."

Standing nearby were John and Jered, who were also recently hired at the plant. Jered has a degree in computer science, but could not find work in the field. Jered said his brother also got a degree but was unemployed for two years before getting a job with a freight railroad. "His degree was nothing but an expensive piece of paper," Jered said.

Both workers, who drive at least 40 miles to the job, mentioned that others drive 70 miles or more, including from Indiana. John used to work at a custom stair company, where he made intricate custom turnings out of wood. He lost his job when the company went bankrupt in 2008, and had to file for bankruptcy as a result.

"You can't live without a credit card now. My cousin who works here will have his house auctioned in three months because of the strike, and his wife and three children, including a newborn, will have to move into his dad's house. If it wasn't for that, they would be homeless."

Picketers said management forced many to accept mandatory overtime and anyone who wants to work a five-day week could expect intimidation from management. Many of the strikers expressed how difficult it was to find time to spend with their families under such pressure.

"It doesn't matter who we vote for," John said, "the top 1 percent get the benefit while the working class is busting our backs to give bonuses to management. It goes all the way up to the CEO who was paid $17 million last

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year. Meanwhile, they write complaining letters to the newspaper about how ‘entitled’ we are. With corporate greed the way it is going we will all just be living in cardboard boxes.”

“This situation just can’t keep going on. Until the big guys take a pay cut, it will get more and more like the civil war in the 1800s, or the American Revolution.”

Community support for the strike was evident. On the nearly barren, industrial road that passes the plant, cars and trucks honked their horns, motorcyclists revved their engines, and a group of cyclists chimed their bells in support.

WSWS reporters also spoke with area residents at nearby stores, finding many with friends and relatives who work at the plant, a small business owner impacted by the strike, and others who face similar issues in their own workplaces.

Cassandra, a refinery worker, said, “As a union worker, I know it’s rough; I was locked out for 10 months from my job at a Citgo Refinery in Lemont, Illinois, in 1996. I don’t think it is fair that CAT workers would get no cost-of-living increase for six years, while everything else goes up. Big companies keep charging more, but our pay doesn’t increase. Then their CEOs get $15, $30 million for screwing over the little man.

“I’ve worked at the refinery for 27 years. I *make* gas—and I don’t even get a nickel off when I go to the pump, no discount, nothing. My sons, 21 and 22, look at a situation where jobs pay $10 an hour. I made that 27 years ago! It is a poverty wage.”

Cassandra went on to detail the cost of living in the area: $650 a month for a very modest apartment, plus electric, phone, cable, food, and transportation; all this on $270 a week after taxes. “Then the rich say “$10 and hour, that ain’t bad.’ Let them try and live on $10 an hour!”

She noted finally that “kids out of college don’t have any future, and I’ve never seen more seniors working at places like McDonalds. These companies suck the life out of you, work you forever, longer than ever before.”

Although there is widespread support for the Caterpillar workers, their strike is being isolated by the IAM and other unions. This struggle can only be won through the fullest industrial mobilization of workers to shut down Caterpillar’s US and international operations.

The IAM and the AFL-CIO, however, are opposed to such a fight. Instead they are currently campaigning for the reelection of President Obama who no less than his Republican challenger Romney backs the corporate assault on workers’ jobs and living standards.

In 2009, the Obama administration carried out the restructuring of the auto industry, which closed dozens of plants and sharply expanded the two-tier wage system, which pays young workers half the wages of traditional workers. The attack on General Motors and Chrysler workers, which was carried out with the full complicity of the United Auto Workers union, is now being emulated by Caterpillar.

An IAM rally the previous week brought out local Democrats and contingents from other nearby unions, including the UAW, which represents some 9,500 other Caterpillar workers. The contract CAT is pushing on IAM workers is modeled after a concessions contract the UAW pushed on its membership in 2011. In that case the UAW prevented a strike, and although strikebreakers at the Joliet plant are continuing to supply parts to UAW-organized CAT facilities, the UAW has made its employees continue to work.

If the struggle of the Caterpillar workers is not to be isolated and defeated like countless strikes and struggles before it rank-and-file workers must take the conduct of the strike and negotiations out of the hands of the IAM and establish independent committees to fight for the industrial and political mobilization of the working class. This requires a fight not only against Caterpillar but against the capitalist system and both big business parties, which are impoverishing workers in order to enrich the corporate and financial elite.

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