

Caterpillar steps up strike-breaking effort in Illinois

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12 June 2012

Caterpillar has placed advertisements for strikebreakers in Chicago and local newspapers as the walkout by 780 workers at the heavy equipment manufacturer's Joliet, Illinois plant enters its seventh week. On Wednesday, May 30, workers overwhelmingly rejected the company's "revised" offer which was worse than the original proposal.

In an email cited by the *Peoria Star*, company spokesman Jim Dugan said Caterpillar had "exhausted the negotiation process" with the International Association of Machinists and was now "focused on serving our customers with our contingency workforce." The company had given workers until June 10 to capitulate to its demands, which include a six-year wage freeze and other attacks on wages and benefits.

The move raises the stakes in the battle with the multinational corporation—which has a long record of strikebreaking—and underscores the necessity to break the isolation of the struggle being imposed by the IAM.

Caterpillar is currently using office personnel to maintain some production at the plant, which produces hydraulic parts. Caterpillar has reportedly been forced to implement rolling shutdowns at its plants in Peoria, Aurora and Decatur, Illinois due to the strike.

Strikers on the picket lines said the company had no interest in negotiating and had planned to bring in scabs all along. One worker, Mike, who has been with Caterpillar since 1995, surmised that the strike was provoked by the company, which was fully aware that the workers would not accept the cuts-laden contract, calling it "a planned lockout."

Last winter, Caterpillar locked out workers at its locomotive manufacturing plant in London, Ontario after they refused to accept a 50 percent wage cut. After three weeks of the lockout, the company shut the

factory doors and announced it was shifting production to Muncie, Indiana, where workers will be paid \$12.50 an hour instead of the \$28 an hour workers in Canada were making.

The danger that the company could impose a similar defeat on workers in Joliet is due to the isolation of the struggle by the IAM as well as the United Auto Workers, which has ordered workers at the majority of Caterpillar plants in the US to continue working.

Opposition remains high on the picket line in Joliet, although workers have been forced to subsist on a meager \$150 a week in strike pay from the IAM. Each CAT worker who spoke with the WSWWS said they were fighting not just for themselves, but for the next generation of workers. Many felt they were taking a stand for the whole working class, which has suffered nothing but wage and benefit cuts while Caterpillar and other corporations raked in huge profits.

One worker who has been at the company for 17 years said, "This is about right and wrong. We are willing to give, but they can't take my pay and seniority that I've worked for when they are making billions. It's not right."

Robert Paterson, a retired machinist, said, "We do not want to take this garbage anymore. When CAT brought in year after year of record profits, they would call an all-plant meeting and say that their profits were still less than they projected, and say workers would have to take a cut even though it was a record profit."

Referring to the first contract offer made by Caterpillar, he said, "That \$5,000 signing bonus is a temporary loan from CAT to pay for the contents of the contract, because they are getting it all back and more in health care increases and wage freezes they are instituting in the contract."

At Sunday's union meeting, IAM officials peddled the claim that the company could be persuaded to come to an agreement through appeals to its large stockholders. They suggested that Democratic Congressional candidate Tammy Duckworth might intercede on their behalf at this week's meeting of Caterpillar shareholders.

This is an utter fraud. Standing behind Caterpillar is the Obama administration, which initiated the wage-cutting campaign against workers with the restructuring of General Motors and Chrysler in 2009. Caterpillar is simply doing what Obama has already done to auto workers. The White House strategy for "reviving manufacturing" hinges entirely on driving wages and benefits so low that corporations will find it profitable to produce in the US rather than Mexico, China and other low-wage countries.

Far from opposing wage-cutting, the IAM and the UAW fully support it. This is how the union apparatus hopes to restore its lost dues income and continue to pay exorbitant salaries to top officials like International President Tom Buffenbarger, who pocketed \$292,000 in compensation in 2011.

The proposal that workers should spend their time appealing to stockholders and Democratic officials is a sure recipe for the defeat of the strike. Caterpillar has demonstrated in its actions in London, Ontario and its use of scabs and violence against striking Illinois workers in the 1990s that it is determined to deliver a blow to the workers in Joliet.

This can only be stopped if rank-and-file workers take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the IAM through the establishment of rank-and-file committees—independent of the union and the Democratic Party—to fight for the full industrial and political mobilization of the working class.

The allies of workers are not Wall Street investors or big business politicians, but the workers in the US and around the world who are facing similar attacks on jobs and living standards. The fight to defend the Caterpillar workers is above all a political struggle to mobilize workers against the economic and political dictatorship of the corporate and financial elite. This can be achieved only by establishing workers' control over basic industries and the banks and reorganizing the economy on the basis of socialism.



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