

# Continued isolation of Caterpillar strike poses grave danger to workers

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Now in its tenth week, the machinist strike at the Caterpillar plant in Joliet is in grave danger. Caterpillar has brought in strikebreakers from other states, and at a job fair last week, CAT is hiring temporary workers from the Joliet area. No new negotiations have been scheduled.

As Caterpillar's strikebreaking efforts mount, the International Association of Mechanists (IAM) has held two protests at company headquarters in an effort to convince Caterpillar shareholders to pressure the company on behalf of the striking workers. Striking workers, who are under enormous economic pressures, are feeling the extreme isolation of this strike and are aware of the danger of defeat that is posed by that isolation. They are told these protests are a way the union is getting the word out about their struggle for a decent living.

But instead of extending the Joliet workers' struggle to other Caterpillar workers—including those at the Peoria headquarters, let alone at the other plants—the union makes an appeal to the conscience of shareholders, whose financial interest is in the continuation of CAT's record profit-taking, guaranteed by the company's ruthless pursuit of low wages and meager benefits.

These protests are exactly the opposite of mounting a struggle within the working class.

In order to cover over their own culpability in isolating the strike, the IAM also issued a leaflet denouncing workers for crossing the picket line. "We are in this fight together, and we must stand together if we are to come out of this with a contract we can live

with," the union declared.

In fact, the IAM, along with the United Auto Workers, is ensuring that the Caterpillar workers are standing in isolation from their brothers and sisters throughout the company and industry. If there are workers who are returning to work, the fundamental responsibility lies with IAM, which rejects any struggle to mobilize the working class as a whole against the strike breaking operations of the company.

The language of the leaflet, moreover, makes clear that the union is preparing to accept massive concessions. This is what is meant by a "contract we can live with."

The shareholder protests employed by the IAM have a long history, and conducting them is now quite a lucrative industry. Former union organizers who pioneered the tactic now operate successful consulting firms which manage the protest campaigns.

The corporate campaign tactic was developed by the middle-class left through the 1970s and particularly the 1980s, and used by the growing trade union bureaucracy to divert workers' struggles away from broad, mass mobilization against strikebreaking. Instead, through various protest stunts, pressure was to be applied to stockholders and advertisers in order to convince corporations to let up in their attacks on workers. The primary goal of this new tactic was to divert worker militancy away from a struggle to halt production at the companies being struck.

Most prominent among the corporate campaign leaders is Ray Rogers, who formed the consulting firm

Corporate Campaigns, Inc. CCI was involved in a series of defeated strikes in the 1980s, at Hormel, International Paper, A.E. Staley and Eastern Airlines. In each case, either the union was broken or workers returned to work with onerous concessions.

The corporate campaign is often accompanied by civil disobedience stunts and consumer boycotts. Another diversionary tactic is the so-called “in plant” strategy employed by the United Auto Workers in the early 1990s. The UAW justified calling off a strike against Caterpillar by claiming they would continue the struggle inside the plant with a work-to-rule effort, which was supposed to cover the UAW’s capitulation to the demands of Caterpillar management.

In light of the ruthless attacks on wages and pensions, the protest tactics, the pushing through of concessionary agreement after concessionary agreement, and the near-total drop off in strike activity are the results of the union executives’ collusion with management in a climate of global capitalist competition.

The trade unions’ support for the Democratic Party, a party of big business, is crucial to understanding their class orientation. The Obama administration’s policies are behind the aggressive push to lower wages, and the AFL-CIO has endorsed Obama for re-election this year. The union ultimately agrees with the wage-lowering policies established by the Obama administration’s restructuring of the Big Three automakers.

The real allies of the working class are other workers, youth, struggling families. The striking workers have said on many occasions they are not striking only for themselves, but for all workers. They must take the conduct of this strike out of the hands of the union and broaden it to other Caterpillar plants and to the working population through the formation of rank and file committees.

Such a strategy must be connected with a political offensive of the entire working class against the capitalist system and both big business parties, which are equally committed to the impoverishment of the working class to defend the profit interests of the giant

corporations.



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