

South Milwaukee Caterpillar workers speak out in support of Joliet strikers

Nicholas Russo, Niles Williamson
27 July 2012

Caterpillar workers in South Milwaukee were eager to talk to the *World Socialist Web Site* and Socialist Equality Party vice presidential candidate Phyllis Scherrer about the record profits at Caterpillar.

On Wednesday, Caterpillar reported \$1.7 billion in net income in the second quarter, up from \$1.02 billion a year ago. (See, “*Twelve weeks into Joliet strike: Caterpillar announces record profits*”)

Based on the boom in global demand for coal and minerals, Caterpillar bought Bucyrus International Inc., a maker of mining equipment, for \$8.8 billion in July of 2011.

Bucyrus, based in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, had revenue of \$3.7 billion last year. It employs 1,400 people in the Milwaukee area and almost 11,000 people worldwide.

When Tom Sullivan became chief executive in 2004, Bucyrus ended the year with revenue of \$454 million. Since then, its revenue has increased eightfold.

The current Chairman and CEO of Caterpillar, Douglas R. Oberhelman, made \$16.9 million in 2011. This was a 60 percent increase from 2010.

On Wednesday, National Public Radio (NPR) reported on the implications of the strike at Caterpillar in Joliet, Illinois for the South Milwaukee plant. NPR cited labor experts that the company’s drive to lower wages was inconsistent with its soaring profits and tried to play down the threat to the wages of the skilled workers in the South Milwaukee facility.

The report itself is an indicator of the concern by Caterpillar and the United Steelworkers over the outcome of the strike in Joliet for the plant in South Milwaukee. The local vice president tried to dispel workers’ concerns by claiming that they are highly skilled workers at the South Milwaukee plant, and members of the United Steelworkers, not the

International Association of Machinists as in Joliet. (See: *Milwaukee Caterpillar Workers Watching Labor Dispute in Illinois*)

Workers from the South Milwaukee plant spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Jessie, with 8 years seniority said, “I think that what happened to the workers in Muncie getting \$12.50 an hour is BS. It is not like we don’t work hard. Especially after all of the profits the company made.

“I think that new organs of struggle could be a great thing if it’s for the rights of workers.”

Ricky said, “Caterpillar is making money. There’s no doubt about that. There was a posting that Caterpillar just announced that since they bought Bucyrus, they have had a 67 percent increase in their profits. They are also projecting future profits for the end of the year. If they are making millions and billions of dollars off of our backs and sweat, and they can’t pay us, then that’s a problem.

“We need to look into a global strategy for workers since our contract is up in May. Are we going to face the same thing as the workers at Joliet? We are the best of the best, not everyone can do what we do. There should be changes, and we should be fighting for the same thing even if we are in different unions.

“We need to be able to trust the union to speak up for us. Hopefully, our word is being heard. When the company was bought, all we heard is that it’s all about the shareholders. Where do we draw the line on how many millions and billions that they can make?

“Just like Tom Sullivan, the old Chief Executive of Bucyrus said: He absolutely put it out there that without the working class, the managers and the shareholders wouldn’t have what they have. I make a thin little slice of what they’re making. So, don’t break me!”

A Caterpillar worker, who asked for his name to be

withheld, responding to the SEP election campaign said, “Basically I don’t see anything happening without a total revolution here in the United States.”

Chris Golliher manufactures mining shovels and is a former Allis Chalmers worker. He told the story of the former union president who was offered the position of “Company Liaison to the Union” by Caterpillar. This was the highest paid position in the factory, which he accepted, and at the same time the company and the union began to implement “Team Leads,” employing engineers and union members to develop standard operating procedures (SOPs) for every position in the manufacturing process.

Chris identified the creation of “Team Leads” and SOPs as a strategy by the company to facilitate the replacement of workers. He said, “We need to stop telling other people how to do our jobs. The root of the evil is implementing lead men and creating standard operating procedures for our jobs, so that anyone can do it.” This seems to be advance preparation by the company to train scabs for a possible strike or lockout next May.

The manufacturing of mining equipment requires workers with a high degree of technical skill. However, as the Joliet strike has made clear, Caterpillar is willing to sacrifice material in the manufacture of defective products with scab labor in order to break a strike.

Chris commented on those who may think that the degree of skill involved in their jobs provides them with security. “There are lots of guys with big heads here, and they need to wake up, especially when they’re telling people step-by-step how to do their job.”

On the aggressive turn against workers by Caterpillar internationally, Chris said, “The root of the evil is greed. They answer to their shareholders. This is a profitable company, but the shareholders always want more. Right now we’re going ‘lean and green,’ next they’re going to come digging in our pockets.”

He noted, “Last year we sold \$400 million in replacement parts, but they told us we wouldn’t get a bonus because Germany had done poorly.”

Anticipating what would happen when their contract comes up in May, he said, “I think they’ll throw us a [bad] contract, but I don’t think the company will be ready, unless they try to bluff these guys. There are lots of new guys. For the last five years the company has

been nice, trying to get us to drink the Kool-Aid.”

When asked if he had a message for the Joliet strikers, he said, “Hang tough. We support them and believe in their fighting for their rights. I have it posted on my locker that I support the union there.”

He noted that in the past the USW had sent strikebreakers to striking Caterpillar factories in Peoria and Aurora. Recognizing this as a betrayal, Chris said about the union, “Things get muddy and corrupt. It all comes down to money.” He added, “If things keep going like they’re going, we’re going to have aristocrats and peasants. We’d like to retain what we have. A decent standard of living is no crime. Working people need to stick together, that’s what makes a strong union.”

Dan expressed disgust about the closing of the plant in London, Ontario, saying, “That was low.” Relating it to his own experiences, he said, “Caterpillar lied to us from day one. They said things would continue like under Bucyrus.”

On the Joliet strike, he stated, “I think Caterpillar isn’t working in good faith. They should open up negotiations.” As far as Caterpillar’s role globally, he added, “I think that corporations want to break the unions.”



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