

# Illinois CAT workers, isolated by union, discuss new way forward

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Approaching the third month of their walkout, over 700 machinists at a Caterpillar plant in Joliet, Illinois, remain determined despite increasingly difficult conditions stemming from the isolation of their struggle by the International Association of Machinists and other unions. Their overwhelming vote to strike on May 1 came in response to the heavy equipment manufacturer's demands for a de facto pay cut, a sharp increase in health care costs, the elimination of defined-benefit pensions, and broad changes in work rules.

Before the strike, Caterpillar ordered workers to train replacement workers. The plant produces hydraulic components for CAT's line of heavy mining and construction equipment, and strikers report having to show sophisticated and precise machinery to replacements in a matter of days, rather than months. The International Association of Machinists (IAM) accepted the demand that they train replacements.

At this point, strikebreakers continue to be bussed into the plant, while Caterpillar is openly seeking permanent replacement workers from the surrounding area. A worker with 19 years, said, "professional strikebreakers, while here, get \$20 an hour, and some want to leave for another strikebreaking job in Texas where they can get \$25 an hour."

Caterpillar, in its press releases and favorable media coverage, claims replacements are exceeding pre-strike production levels. Workers on the picket line say otherwise. Another worker said, "I have a neighbor who works in Pontiac, Illinois, and he says they are facing cuts in orders because companies are afraid of the parts quality that the scab labor is producing. We hear from inside the plant that they have a whole warehouse of scrap, trashed parts that were not made properly."

Strikers also report that some work within the plant may be abolished for good. "Caterpillar told us they were moving the fuel tank line to Mexico, then we found out it

has been moved to a local warehouse for non-union labor to do." A worker drove by the reported location, a nondescript building in an industrial park away from the strike, and found private security posted outside the warehouse, similar to the security at their strike.

Since going on strike, workers are only getting \$150 a week in strike pay. Strikers are increasingly falling behind on home and car payments and some are facing foreclosure. One worker said he faced an impossible rise in health care costs, "[W]hen CAT took our health care away for going on strike, we were told to pay for Cobra if we want to maintain coverage, which is \$1,250 a month. If you have a family it is even more. And it is regressive—we had to sign up by a certain point, and we pay for the months previous regardless of when we signed up."

A union steward, referring to those around him said, "A lot of us are older, near retirement, but these young guys are suffering. They are just starving them out so that they will cross the picket line and go back to work. Some are supplemental, they are on the lower tier and they aren't making what we are making. It is tough to find other work, because when you apply elsewhere, they ask where you are from. If you say Caterpillar, they won't touch you."

After over a dozen visits to the picket line on Channahon Rd., reporters for the *World Socialist Website* found a notably more outspoken, frustrated mood. Discussion went on at length, but those we spoke with preferred to avoid stating their names on this visit. One said, "Don't use our names, we have a company with a long memory."

Referring to the company and the union, one worker said, "Neither side is doing anything! Most of our union committee got other jobs, and the union itself is telling us to get other jobs, non-union jobs. The union also told us to sign up for unemployment. Commenting on the IAM's

impotent protests aimed at appealing to shareholders and management, he continued, “They’ve got informational pickets at the Peoria headquarters that is doing nothing.”

What role the IAM plays, and how to carry the struggle forward, was a central topic. After being handed the World Socialist Web Site newsletter on their strike, a worker responded, “I read you guys on the internet. Your the ones who are saying the union is in cahoots with Caterpillar.”

WSWS reporters discussed the recent betrayal by the Canadian Auto Workers union of the Caterpillar workers in London, Ontario whose plant was closed after they refused to accept a 50 percent wage cut. The nationalist and pro-capitalist policies of the unions on both sides of the border, the reporters explained, served to pit workers against each other in a fratricidal struggle to see who would work for less.

“I do agree with you guys that what this country needs is a coordinated labor effort... now it is one plant, one union, and they don’t back each other up. Even years ago when the United Auto Workers [which represents the majority of CAT workers] was on strike, the IAM didn’t do a damn thing to support it. We continued to make parts for the striking plants. That’s what surprised me about the IAM going on strike about this, though this is a bad contract... this is the worst one I’ve ever seen.”

The parts machined at the Joliet plant are tied to numerous other Caterpillar plants, including facilities in Decatur, Peoria, and nearby Aurora, Illinois. UAW-organized workers at these and other CAT facilities continue working using parts produced by strikebreakers at the Joliet Plant.

The UAW pushed a concessions-laden contract on this workforce in 2011, which serves as a precedent for the contract being demanded by CAT in Joliet. The UAW contract also contains a no-strike pledge, which leaves CAT workers isolated in face of Caterpillars demands. Like the IAM, the UAW is campaigning all out for the reelection of President Obama whose strategy of “in-sourcing” involves utilizing the services of the unions to lower wages of US workers and undercut workers in other countries.

If left isolated by the unions Caterpillar workers face defeat. Workers must take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the IAM and elect rank-and-file committees to appeal to all Caterpillar workers and all workers to broaden the struggle. As ruthless as Caterpillar as workers are confronting not just a single employer but the entire capitalist economic and political system that is

impoverishing workers in every country in order to enrich the wealthy few. To conduct such a fight a new, socialist and international strategy is needed.

This was the perspective discussed with strikers, many of whom were eager to discuss a new direction. A 15-year employee, responding to the idea of linking up with the full workforce, said, “That’s what we should do, figure out when the UAW contract is up and time it up with us.”

A 19-year veteran standing next to him was suspicious of a sell-out deal by the IAM. “They will say ‘here is the contract...we’ll give you ex-number of dollars if you sign it.’ Then after you sign it they fill in the blanks. Give me the contract in dry ink and let me look at it.

“If you oppress, oppress and oppress people, they’re going to get tired of it. There is going to be a third American revolution. I don’t know whether it will happen in my lifetime. I’m not a violent person and I’m not advocating for violence but enough is enough.

“Cat looks at their employees like commodities. They treat you good when they need you and then when they don’t, they treat you like dirt. That’s probably 85-90 percent of American corporate culture.”

“I don’t see where Obama’s done much of anything. He hasn’t done a thing to support working people. The only time when they care about Americans is where there is a war and they need people to make stuff in their plants, or to go fight and die in the war.” Commenting on social inequality, he added, hasn’t the world been like this since the Egyptians? You had the pharaohs that were rich, and you have the slaves who built the pyramids.”



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