

Illinois Democrats feign support for Caterpillar strikers

James Nykvist
15 August 2012

After nearly four months on strike, Caterpillar workers in Joliet, Illinois continue their determined fight against the heavy equipment giant's drive to slash their living standards by freezing wages, sharply increasing health care contributions and condemning the next generation of workers to poverty-level wages.

On the picket line in Joliet, the 780 striking workers know they cannot take on this transnational corporation alone. At the same time, there is a growing recognition by Caterpillar workers at the company's other factories that they will face the same attack in the immediate future.

Despite the sentiment for a common struggle, the International Association of Machinists (the bargaining agent at the Joliet plant) and other unions, including the United Auto Workers (UAW) and United Steelworkers, have deliberately isolated the striking workers. The unions have enforced plant-by-plant agreements, which divide the Caterpillar workers and allow the corporation to make them compete in a race to the bottom over wages, benefits and working conditions.

In its discussions with workers in Joliet and at other CAT factories, the *World Socialist Web Site* has won increasing support for its call for the organization of rank-and-file committees to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the unions and break the isolation of the struggle through joint industrial and political action by all Caterpillar workers.

There is great interest in the Socialist Equality Party's election campaign, with many workers expressing their disgust with the multi-millionaire candidates of both big business parties, Barack Obama and Mitt Romney. On the picket lines and at the factory gates workers have warmly received the SEP presidential and vice presidential candidates, Jerry White and Phyllis Scherrer, and engaged in serious

discussions on the party's international and socialist policies.

Under these conditions, the IAM and other unions have dragged out various Democratic Party politicians over the past few weeks, including Illinois Governor Pat Quinn and US Senator Dick Durbin, to the picket lines to feign support for the embattled workers and make token donations to the strike fund. IAM President Tom Buffenbarger also appealed to President Obama to "put on his comfy shoes" and walk the picket line with striking workers.

This has nothing to do with breaking the isolation of the strike. On the contrary it is aimed at maintaining the political domination of the Democratic Party and blocking the development of a political struggle against both parties of big business that could rally powerful support in the working class for the Caterpillar strikers.

The unions' claim that Obama and the Democrats are the friends of the striking workers is a complete fraud.

The attack carried out by Caterpillar has been modeled on the savage wage and benefit cuts the Obama administration imposed on General Motors and Chrysler workers during the 2009 restructuring of the auto industry. This included a 50 percent pay cut for new hires, which was imposed with the full collaboration of the UAW. In exchange, the White House handed the UAW control of billions in corporate stocks.

In a recent campaign stop in Colorado, President Obama bragged about the massive profits of the auto bosses and made it clear that the wage and benefit cuts imposed on auto workers would be repeated throughout every industry. In an ominous note, the president said, "I want to do the same thing with manufacturing jobs, not just in the auto industry, but in every industry."

In other words, Caterpillar is taking a page out of

Obama's book. The president's strategy of "insourcing" is predicated on driving wages so low in the US that major corporations like Caterpillar will no longer have to go to Mexico or China for cheap labor.

The success of this strategy depends entirely on the trade unions, which function as a labor police force for the corporations and the government. If they are forced to call strikes at all, it is only to isolate these struggles, put workers on starvation rations and wear them down until they accept management's dictates.

The IAM has donated more than \$1.3 million to the Democratic Party in 2012. The unions support the Democrats not because they are "friends of labor," i.e., the working class, but because they are friends of the union apparatus. The high salaries of labor executives like Buffenbarger—who took home \$245,000 last year—depend on the continued use of the union apparatus to attack workers.

In contrast to the Republicans, the Democrats tend more to rely on the services of the unions to accomplish this. That is what lies behind their undying support for the Democratic Party, even as it pursues the interests of Wall Street just as viciously as the Republicans.

If Joliet workers are not to be defeated they must take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the IAM and other unions and develop a new strategy.

Workers must break with the IAM and the UAW and form independent committees, democratically controlled by the rank-and-file, to fight the attacks on jobs and living standards. These committees should establish lines of communication with rank-and-file workers at Caterpillar plants throughout the country to prepare a company-wide strike.

Workers need an international strategy to counter the global strategy of the corporation. This means rejecting the "Buy American" nationalism of the unions and the Democratic Party and forging the closest ties with CAT workers in Latin America, Europe and Asia to defend all workers.

This is not just a fight against one company but the entire political establishment, which stands behind Caterpillar and the Wall Street banks that are seeking to impoverish the working class. The Democratic Party is not a "people's party" but a capitalist party that defends the interests of the corporate and financial elite just as ruthlessly as the Republicans. To unite every struggle against wage-cutting, austerity and war the

working class must build a new mass political party to fight for a workers' government and the reorganization of economic and political life to meet the needs of the working people, not the super-rich.

This means the struggle for socialism and the nationalization of the big corporations and banks under the democratic control of the working class. The struggle at Caterpillar shows that the social needs of the working class are totally incompatible with the continued existence of capitalism and the rule of the corporate executives and big investors.

Building a new socialist leadership among workers and young people is absolutely necessary. This is the aim of the Socialist Equality Party and its 2012 presidential election campaign. For more information, visit socialequality.com.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact