

Steelworkers union exposes workers to lockout threat as talks resume at South Milwaukee Caterpillar plant

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With the resumption of negotiations Wednesday between Caterpillar and the United Steelworkers (USW), workers at the South Milwaukee plant must remain on high alert. There can be little doubt that United Steelworkers bureaucrats are working behind the backs of workers to enforce a rotten agreement with the company in the face of overwhelming opposition.

Last week Caterpillar workers in South Milwaukee rejected a six-year concessions contract by a wide margin, authorizing a strike. The deal would have frozen wages, reduced the pay of new hires to “market rates” as low as \$13.46 an hour, and imposed other givebacks. After the sellout agreement brought back by the union was defeated, the USW opposed the calling of a strike, instead instructing workers to continue working without a contract.

By rejecting strike action, the USW has neutralized any effective means of struggle by South Milwaukee workers, leaving them vulnerable to a lockout. Furthermore, the USW has deliberately isolated the struggle in South Milwaukee, doing nothing to mobilize other workers in the region behind the Caterpillar workers.

In a statement released after workers overwhelmingly voted down Caterpillar’s first contract offer, USW International President Leo Gerard paid lip service to the workers while indicating the union’s willingness to work hand in hand with corporate management. “Steelworkers in South Milwaukee have earned and deserve a fair contract that preserves these family and community-sustaining middle class jobs for the long term. We also understand that a strong, healthy company means more security for our employment, earnings and benefits,” he declared.

This makes it clear that the ongoing talks will not be “negotiations” in any serious sense but a conspiracy against Caterpillar workers. The USW is committed to the defense of the company’s profits and is only seeking to find a combination of bogus signing bonuses and threats to sell the agreement to its members. For its part, Caterpillar management has no doubt given the USW a deadline to push its demands through or it will lock out workers and bring in scab workers as it has done at other factories.

Despite constant reassurances from the union and statements in the media, the highly skilled nature of the work alone is not enough to protect South Milwaukee workers from Caterpillar’s plan to slash wages and benefits. Workers at Caterpillar’s Electro-Motive Diesel plant in London, Ontario were repeatedly assured that their skills made them irreplaceable. The company’s response to the rejection of a 50 percent wage cut was to lock 465 workers out and then after six weeks to announce the closure of the plant. Jobs were moved to a non-union plant in Muncie, Indiana, paying as low as \$12 an hour.

Last weekend Caterpillar announced the layoff of an additional 300 employees at its Decatur, Illinois plant, this on top of 460 layoffs announced last month. The company also announced that it will be shuttering its tunnel-boring machinery plant in Toronto by the middle of next year, throwing 330 people out of work. These announcements were made the weekend before the resumption of so-called negotiations in part to place increasing pressure on South Milwaukee workers to accept deep concessions.

Caterpillar is utilizing the global slowdown in the demand for mining equipment to carrying out a global

strategy to shed labor costs through layoffs and reductions in wages and benefits. The path has been cleared for this by the sellout agreement signed by the United Auto Workers, which represents the majority of Caterpillar workers in the US, and the betrayal of the strike in Joliet, Illinois by the International Association of Machinists last year.

Caterpillar has a decades-long record of enforcing concessions on its workforce. Caterpillar waged ruthless battles against its workers throughout the 1990s, utilizing scabs to enforce the reduction of wages and benefits. Rather than expanding the struggle in the face of deep concessions and the use of scabs by Caterpillar, the UAW surrendered, telling workers to return to work after five and half months on strike in 1992. In 1994 when Caterpillar workers once again went on strike the AFL-CIO and UAW stood aside as the company utilized white collar workers as strikebreakers, along with thousands of unionized workers who crossed picket lines to maintain operations.

The USW's role in betraying its membership and enforcing sellout contracts has been equally blatant. In one recent example the USW enforced a concessions contract, which slashed wages for new hires and increased piecework quotas on Cooper Tire workers in Findlay, Ohio after a three-month lockout by the company. The struggle was betrayed by the USW, which pushed through a concessions contract at Cooper Tire's plant in Texarkana, Arkansas, isolating the Findlay workers.

One only has to look at the vacant steel mills of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, international headquarters of the USW, to get a sense of the immense social destruction overseen by the union. Between 1967 and 1992 the city of Pittsburgh lost 73 percent of its industrial jobs. Rather than oppose this, the USW collaborated with the employers to make them "more competitive" and protect the income and perks of bureaucrats like Gerard who pulls in \$200,000 a year.

Politically, the USW is aligned with Obama and the Democrats, which no less than the Republicans defend the interests of the Wall Street banks and corporate America. The explicit strategy of the Obama administration is "in-sourcing," ie., driving wages so low in America as to entice companies like Caterpillar to produce in the US rather than Mexico, China and

other low wage countries.

The USW like the rest of the official unions long ago ceased to be a genuine workers organization. Instead it functions as an arm of management, doing what is necessary to ensure increasing profits for the company while suppressing the resistance of workers.

If Caterpillar workers are to advance their own interests, they must break with the USW and form independent rank-and-file committees to mobilize workers within the plants and link up their struggles with Caterpillar workers throughout the United States, and internationally. Only an independent struggle by the working class, guided by a socialist and internationalist perspective, can successfully confront transnational corporations like Caterpillar.

This is of necessity a political struggle. It requires a break with the Democratic Party and the building of an independent political party of the working class.

All who wish to take up this fight should contact the Socialist Equality Party at sep@socialistequality.com



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