

Contract talks break down at S. Milwaukee Caterpillar plant

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Contract negotiations between the United Steelworkers and Caterpillar in South Milwaukee broke down this week, only hours after talks resumed. USW sub-district director Ross Winklbauer reported that Caterpillar turned down the union's proposal, which allegedly called for pay raises during some of the six years of the contract and the maintenance of seniority rights. Caterpillar reportedly presented an offer which further reduced workers benefits and withdrew the \$2,500 signing bonus.

While no future meetings have been scheduled between the company and the union's negotiating team Winklbauer indicated his eagerness to work out an agreement with Caterpillar, stating, "We are anxious to get back to the bargaining table with this company."

Despite the company's intransigence the USW continues to refuse to call a strike. Winklbauer took the opportunity to rule out a strike or any other immediate action by the workforce, stating, "All workers need to know now is that they need to keep showing up to work and keep showing solidarity."

A strike was authorized last Tuesday when the workers overwhelmingly voted down a concessions contract which froze wages for six years, reduced the pay of new workers to "market rates" as low as \$13.46 an hour, increased health care costs, and imposed other significant give backs.

By rejecting strike action, the USW has neutralized any effective means of struggle by the workers. Accordingly, Caterpillar maintains the upper hand as it can lock workers out at any time it chooses. Caterpillar has utilized lockouts recently to demoralize its workforce and enforce concessions contracts.

In an interview with the *World Socialist Web Site*, a senior Caterpillar worker expressed his frustration with the USW's refusal to call a strike, stating, "I was under

the impression that we would go out at midnight after negotiations broke off. By the way it looks from comments by workers on the local's web page these guys want to strike, and they want to strike now. We aren't seeing any push back against the company at all from the sub-district or the International. A lot of the guys are questioning the International as to why they aren't calling a strike."

There is a strong desire among many of the South Milwaukee workers to actively resist Caterpillars concession demands, the worker said, explaining, "These guys have gotten over the frightening aspect of not having income, they want to fight, and they don't want to give in to a concessions contract like this. We're not just fighting for ourselves; we're fighting for the guys coming up behind us."

Support for a wildcat walkout has been circulating through the factory, he said, adding, "Either the union does something or these guys are going to walk. They just keep telling the guys to go back to work, but the guys in the plant would rather be out on the street than going through this situation where we're being held in limbo. The union and Caterpillar are putting on a show; this is theater like I've never seen before. This is downright horrible. It's got to hit the fan pretty soon. I hope something happens."

Speculating on the USW's strategy going forward, he stated, "The union will try to play the mediation game and then Caterpillar will lock us out. I think the union might be hoping the company locks us out so we can get unemployment pay."

Speaking about the USW's handling of negotiations, he stated, "The International doesn't give a damn about what's going on with the workers here. They haven't spoken to us. There hasn't been transparency from any level: the local, the sub-district, the International. They

put forward all this talk about solidarity, and then we get nothing.”



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