USW pushes sellout deal at South Milwaukee Caterpillar plant

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Last Thursday, the United Steelworkers (USW) Local 1343 negotiating committee reached a tentative six-year agreement with heavy equipment manufacturer Caterpillar covering 800 workers at its South Milwaukee, Wisconsin plant. Knowing full well that it will face widespread opposition to the sellout deal, USW is withholding any information about the contract and plans to give workers only two days to review the "highlights" before holding a ratification vote on June 11.

The USW and Caterpillar have only met three times since workers overwhelmingly rejected the initial contract on April 30. During the entire negotiating process the union has kept workers in the dark while working out a deal behind their backs.

The union claims the new deal is an improvement. But nothing of any significance could have been extracted from Caterpillar—a company that has waged an unrelenting attack on workers from North America and Europe to Australia and Asia—without the most bitter struggle. Instead, the USW blocked any fight, ignoring the April 30 vote by workers to strike and then cobbled together a deal, which has handed Caterpillar its demands.

This has left workers at the South Milwaukee plant in grave danger. Workers should demand that the USW immediately reveal the full details of the agreement. This should be the beginning of a struggle to defeat the sellout and appeal to workers throughout CAT production facilities to mobilize in a common struggle. Workers should elect a rank-and-file committee—made up of the most militant and trusted workers—to take the conduct of the negotiations out of hands of the USW.

Last week at a meeting in Great Britain of the IndustriALL Caterpillar Trade Union Network, a global alliance of various trade union bureaucracies formed in 2012, USW sub-district director and chief negotiator Ross Winklbauer and other international union representatives endorsed a groveling statement to CEO Doug Oberhelman begging him to bargain in "good faith." It concludes by reminding the CEO that Caterpillar's unionized workforce is its "most valuable asset."

Opposed to any fight to unite workers against the global corporation, the unions are seeking to help each other block a rebellion by workers. This has nothing to do with "internationalism." Instead, the respective nationally based unions are aiding Caterpillar in its efforts to pit workers in different countries against one another in a race to the bottom.

Along these lines the USW has blocked any action by workers in South Milwaukee to defend their wages and benefits. The USW ruled out any strike, giving the company the upper hand and leaving workers vulnerable to a lockout—a tactic CAT has repeatedly used around the world to achieve its cost-cutting aims.

USW local and international officials have spent the last month—not preparing a fight—but trying to figure out how to divide workers and add some cosmetic "sweeteners" to sell the deal. Dedicated to "labor-management partnership," the USW, like the United Auto Workers, the International Association of Machinists, and other unions at CAT plants are eager to reach an deal that will maintain the company's record corporate profits and the union bureaucracy's own institutional interests.

The USW negotiating committee has endorsed the agreement dispensing the pretense of "neutrality" as they did before the April 30 vote. That agreement would have frozen wages and pensions for current employees, and slashed pay for new hires based on its demand for "market based wages."

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If CAT is allowed to extract these concessions when it is turning record profits, there will be no point in the future in which workers will get anything back. Under conditions of the global capitalist crisis, stagnation of Europe and a slowdown in demand in China, CAT plans to maintain profits by establishing a "new normal" of poverty wages and brutal speedup.

Now is time for the working class to make a stand! Workers must above all reject any concessions.

But CAT workers cannot fight alone. In every industry and workplace workers are facing the same demands. The struggle in South Milwaukee should be the beginning of a counteroffensive of the working class to guarantee secure jobs, income and pensions for all workers. A broad appeal must be made to workers throughout the metropolitan region, nationally, and internationally to join them in their fight.

It is not possible for workers to defend their interests through the Democratic Party, which, no less than the Republicans, defends Wall Street and corporate America. President Obama has overseen a "recovery" of corporate profits and the stock market through the ever-greater impoverishment of the working class.

CAT workers must make a decisive break with the USW and the Democratic Party, and fight for the full industrial and political mobilization of the working class. If the social rights of workers are to take priority over the interests and profits of the rich, workers must take up the fight for socialism. In order to solve the problems faced by workers everywhere, economic life must be reorganized to meet human need, not private profit. This can only be achieved by taking the industrial monopolies, such as Caterpillar, and the banks out of the control of the rich and placing them under the democratic control of workers themselves.

We encourage those interested in taking up this fight to contact the Socialist Equality Party today at sep@socialistequality.com.

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