

Union rams through sellout deal at Caterpillar South Milwaukee plant

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Without releasing the vote count, officials from the United Steelworkers (USW) union announced that workers at Caterpillar's Global Mining plant in South Milwaukee on Tuesday narrowly accepted a six-year concessions contract recommended by the USW.

The deal, which is virtually identical to the one overwhelmingly rejected by workers at the end of April, imposes a new benchmark for the exploitation not only at the heavy equipment manufacturing giant but throughout industry. The contract, which covers approximately 800 workers, will go into effect on June 17.

No confidence can be placed in the union's claims that a majority of workers actually ratified the agreement. Contacted by the *World Socialist Web Site* Wednesday, a spokesperson at the USW Local 1343 office said only local president Kevin Jaskie and USW sub-district director Ross Winklbauer knew the vote total, and "they didn't want anyone else to know that information."

"It was very close," Winklbauer told the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*.

Hundreds of workers came out to vote, with the union reporting a 95 percent turnout. There was deep opposition to the deal, which includes a six-year wage and pension freeze, a pay-for-performance scheme and "market-based" wages for new hires as low as \$13.46 an hour. In addition, the deal forces workers into a 401(k) plan and includes "flexible" work schedules, which will allow the company to lay workers off for tens weeks per year—the equivalent of a full year over the life of the contract.

Workers will receive \$85 for a one-day layoff and \$170 for one week as a supplement to the already inadequate unemployment payments they would receive. Even these meager benefits will end after 52

cumulative weeks of layoffs.

South Milwaukee workers face imminent layoffs, which were previously announced by the company as talks were set to begin in April. As much as 40 percent of the workforce, approximately 300 workers, could be laid off in the two weeks. The USW fully accepted these layoffs and saw them as an additional means to pressure workers to accept management's demands.

Echoing company claims that it had reached a "fair" deal, local president Jaskie said the union was "proud of the work we do for the world's largest manufacturer of mining equipment."

Winklbauer praised the bargaining committee for doing a "hell of a job," adding, "I believe if the committee hadn't recommended the contract, it probably would have been voted down again." In fact, the union repeatedly defied the sentiments of workers, ordering them to continue working despite a vote to strike, and returning virtually the identical agreement, which workers rejected before.

Winklbauer acknowledged, "Even though this contract was accepted there are a lot of unhappy workers out there. They didn't vote for it because they thought this was the greatest thing in the world. They voted for it because they thought this was the best we were going to get."

Well aware that workers wanted to fight this attack—under conditions in which the company was making huge profits and handing its top executives multimillion-dollar pay packages—the USW resorted to the thuggish methods it has long utilized to intimidate opponents and implement management's will.

Supporters of the Socialist Equality party distributed the statement "Reject the USW sellout in South Milwaukee! For an independent struggle by the working class!" to workers as they entered the Local

1343 union hall to cast their vote, calling on the rank and file to break with the union and reject the contract.

Determined to push through the deal, USW officials positioned in front of the hall snatched SEP leaflets away from workers and tore them up or destroyed them in a shredder placed on the sidewalk.

They also employed their standard redbaiting tactics and anticommunism in an effort to prevent workers from speaking with SEP supporters. One member of the USW negotiating committee, Brad Doriff, showed his true colors, denouncing the SEP's statement as "propaganda against the company."

Many workers were undeterred by these crude attempts and spoke to the WSWS. A machine shop worker for eight years, said, "Its crap, plain and simple. This is a result of the global economy. What people don't realize is that these 'market-based' wages are just going to suck wages down lower and lower.

"This is going to hurt everybody, from workers to engineers." Speaking about the new bonus system, he said, "They can manipulate that anyway they want. We had that in our contract when I worked at another plant. We saw a bonus the first year, but after that, targets were set so that we never saw another bonus."

A veteran worker with 35 years at the plant said, "This is no good. I've never really been satisfied with any contract we've had." He explained how hours have been cut, "Last year, I lost \$20,000 due to lost overtime. Years ago, you could make a down payment on a house with your overtime. You could get the hours."

One worker with nine years at the plant said about the contract, "I don't like it. The senior guys don't like it. The younger guys don't know what's coming yet. I feel real bad for them." He came back over to an SEP supporter after reading the statement, "I didn't know who you guys were or who you were working for. I see you are for me. Thank you."



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