

South Milwaukee Caterpillar workers challenge union on ratification of sellout contract

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Workers at Caterpillar's Global Mining plant in South Milwaukee are challenging claims by the United Steelworkers that a new six-year agreement containing deep concessions was actually ratified by a majority of workers last week. The union has refused to release any details on the vote totals.

The contract imposes a six-year wage freeze on current employees, freezes pensions and establishes "market-based" wages for new hires. Working hand in hand with Caterpillar to ram through the contract, the United Steelworkers (USW) ignored the strike authorization vote by workers and brought back virtually the identical contract, which had been rejected by 82 percent of those workers who voted the month before.

Immediately after the "passage" of the deal, Caterpillar announced the layoff of hundreds of workers at the plant.

According to a report by the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, workers throughout the plant have been clamoring for an accounting from the union. One anonymous worker stated, "I would like to know, and some of the other guys in my department would too."

Roman Damask, a member of USW Local 1343, told the newspaper that most of the people he works with in the plant voted against the contract offer. "I honestly think this latest count was bogus," Damask said. "There are a lot of people walking around saying they want to see the numbers."

According to reports, in the first vote at the end of April workers rejected the contract by 600 to 130. Calling on the union to release the vote totals, Damask said, "I want to put a lot of pressure on the union because this is BS. I guess we are going to have to get

the guys together, hire an attorney and sue them." He has plans to file a suit with the National Labor Relations Board to force the union to release the vote totals.

Workers at South Milwaukee have good reason to be suspicious of the outcome of last week's vote. The American trade union bureaucracy has a long and sordid history of duplicity, gangster-like intimidation and ballot stuffing in order to impose concessions against the will of the rank and file.

During the voting itself, USW Local 1343 officials red-baited and attempted to intimidate members of the Socialist Equality Party who were distributing leaflets to workers calling for a 'no' vote. Well aware of the deep opposition to their sellout, officials snatched leaflets from workers' hands and put them in a shredding machine set up in front of the union hall. It is now clear these efforts were aimed not only at the SEP but also at the workers themselves.

USW officials claim the union's bylaws allow for vote totals to be kept secret from the membership. The only ones privy to the actual outcome are USW Sub-District 2 director and chief negotiator Ross Winklbauer and Kevin Jaskie, the President of Local 1343. Winklbauer made the absurd claim that revealing the outcome of the vote would undermine the union's future negotiations with the company. "We like to keep the company guessing a bit. We do that as a bargaining chip," Winklbauer said.

Responding to widespread suspicion that the USW International simply rigged the vote, Winklbauer added defensively, "Our people have nothing to do with the count, and we have never been told that we have done anything illegally."

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to a senior Caterpillar worker who questioned the outcome of the contract vote. “Who knows what went on when that ballot box was being moved? Winklbauer and Jaskie are the only ones that know what the actual vote was. I heard, unofficially, that the margin was 7 votes but there needs to be transparency. The vote should absolutely be publicly certified.”

Asked how he voted on the contract he replied, “Mine was a ‘no’ vote. I’ve never seen it get to the point where the contract is a no-lose for the company. There are enough old-time union types at the plant who understand that the contract was unacceptable. This doesn’t just hurt us but hurts workers in the whole area.”

Pointing to how the USW and Caterpillar orchestrated the sellout, he added, “There was definitely collusion there with the International pulling all their weight.”

Appeals to the NLRB and the courts will not end this conspiracy. The courts have long sanctioned the suppression of workers by the trade unions. This experience vindicates the warnings made by the SEP and our call for workers to form rank-and-file committees, independently of the pro-corporate and pro-capitalist trade unions. Only by breaking the stranglehold of these anti-labor organizations can CAT workers initiate an industrial and political struggle in the US and internationally to defend their jobs and living standards. We encourage workers to contact the SEP.



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