

UAW orders thousands of Caterpillar workers to stay on the job as contract expires

Marcus Day
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The United Auto Workers (UAW) ordered its members at Caterpillar, Inc. to continue working Tuesday night as its previous six-year contract with the heavy equipment manufacturer expired.

In a statement released shortly before the midnight contract expiration, the UAW wrote, “The UAW/CAT Bargaining Committee continues to work hard at the bargaining table. We have agreed to continue working beyond the expiration of the contract in hopes of achieving an agreement in the best interest of all members.”

Caterpillar released a similar statement, saying, “Although we have not yet reached an agreement, we have agreed to work without a contract while negotiating outstanding issues. Both parties remain at the bargaining table, focused on reaching a fair and reasonable agreement...Securing the right agreement is our team’s highest priority, and we’ll use this extra time to ensure we do it well.”

Seeking to intimidate workers and prevent them from taking any wildcat action, UAW Local 751 in Decatur, Illinois, posted on Facebook, “Work is to remain business as usual until directed otherwise. Your job is not protected if you walk out while negotiations are still in process.”

Contract negotiations between the UAW and Caterpillar officially began on January 4. The previous contract, reached in 2011, covered approximately 9,500 workers and contained sharp increases in health care costs and attacks on pensions. Given the recent waves of layoffs, it’s unclear how many workers remain employed and would be affected by a new agreement. Neither the union nor the company has released that figure.

At the beginning of February, workers expressed their determination to win back decades of lost wages

and benefits by voting by an overwhelming 93 percent to authorize the UAW to call a strike in the face of renewed demands for sacrifice.

Caterpillar has seen its revenue and profits plummet over the past several years as a result of global stagnation in the real economy. Having bet big on mining equipment with a series of multibillion dollar investments and acquisitions at the beginning of the decade, Caterpillar responded to the developing slump in commodity prices and subsequent downturn in machinery orders with a slash-and-burn strategy of factory closures and mass layoffs. The company has cut its global workforce by at least 16,000 since late 2015, a reduction of roughly 10 percent.

In seeking to shore up their profits and scapegoat workers of other countries for the capitalist economic crisis, Caterpillar’s executives, along with the heads of the AFL-CIO and the UAW, are joining President Donald Trump in his promotion of reactionary “America First” nationalism.

Former CEO Doug Oberhelman, who is the chairman of a White House working group on infrastructure, met with Trump last week to push for an infrastructure investment plan which would boost sales of Caterpillar’s construction equipment. After reports that such a plan may be delayed until 2019, Caterpillar’s stock slid still further.

Trump’s infrastructure plan has nothing to do with advancing the interests of workers and is designed to further privatize public infrastructure and utilities while slashing existing safety regulations. It involves a massive government give-away to private business that would receive subsidies and then allowed to take over operation of critical infrastructure in order to reap even further profits.

Following a net loss of \$67 million in 2016,

Caterpillar is no doubt seeking to escalate its own attacks on workers in the current negotiations. In an indication of the collusion between the union and the company, both the UAW and Caterpillar have instituted a media blackout. Workers are being kept completely in the dark as to the extent and severity of concessions related to wages, health care, pensions and work rules that the company is demanding.

The UAW, recalling the mass opposition to the 2015 sellout contract in auto, fears another rebellion from an already hostile membership should the content of their back-room talks with Caterpillar become known. The union bureaucrats hope to present any deal as an accomplished fact and force a vote without providing adequate time to study the details, as they did at Deere and Company two years ago, where they presented workers with phony “highlights” then organized a snap vote.

It has been many decades since the UAW abided by the principle “no contract, no work.” In the same manner, at AT&T Mobility wireless, the Communications Workers of America (CWA) is forcing its 21,000 members to continue working, two weeks after their contract expired.

Following the announcement that work would continue after the contract expiration, Caterpillar workers took to social media to denounce the UAW. “Why the hell wear red shirts when we don’t even know what the union is asking for or where the negotiations even stand,” commented Tom Russell, a worker in Morton. “Solidarity, ha, that’s funny.”

Tonya McClain wrote, “Well I know what [Local] 974 has done for me and that’s nothing.” “Chuc Mustread” in East Peoria noted bitterly, “I’m not sure who is worse... Our UAW union or Caterpillar??”

Richard Crady, a recent retiree, described the relentless givebacks extracted during his final years of work, saying, “Before I retired a month ago after having enough of Caterpillar, I hadn’t had an across the board pay raise in 10 years. Living on the same pay as 10 years ago while insurance premiums went up, insurance coverage went down, out of pocket cost went up.”

In their current battle to reverse years of job losses and declining living standards, workers must place absolutely no confidence in the UAW, which has proven that it is wholly on the side of the corporations.

Workers must take matters into their own hands, form independent organizations of the rank-and-file at every plant and develop lines of communication with the tens of thousands of other Caterpillar workers in the US and around the world, appealing for a common struggle in defense of jobs, decent living standards, and the rights of the working class as a whole.



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