

Workers have the right to study the full contract!

Caterpillar-UAW deal: An anti-worker conspiracy

Marcus Day
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The United Auto Workers union announced Wednesday afternoon that it had reached a tentative agreement on a new six-year contract with Caterpillar. The announcement comes a little more than two weeks after the previous contract with the construction and mining equipment giant expired. Since then, the union has ordered workers to stay on the job, defying the sentiment for a struggle expressed in the 93 percent vote authorizing a strike.

The UAW has maintained an information blackout on the content of the deal and its backroom negotiations with Caterpillar, while telling its members they will face a snap vote on March 26, allowing no time for workers to study the full agreement. “No details will be publicly released until Caterpillar UAW members have had a chance to review the agreement and highlights, and vote on the agreement,” the union wrote in a statement.

Workers must be warned: any agreement reached with Caterpillar under conditions in which no serious fight has been conducted can be nothing more than an outright betrayal on par with those repeatedly carried out by the UAW since the 1980s, and can only entail an acceleration of the attacks on jobs and living standards.

This must not be allowed to happen! Rank-and-file workers should raise the demand at every plant to be given the full contract and all memoranda of understanding now—not self-serving “highlights” a few days before the vote. Workers should have at least two weeks to comb through the “fine print,” discuss the details, and organize opposition to company demands.

The pro-corporate character of the secret union-company agreement was underscored almost immediately by the positive reception of Caterpillar and its wealthy stockholders. CAT hailed the deal, saying it “successfully balances the needs of an increasingly competitive global marketplace and recognizes the contribution of our employees by providing fair, competitive wages and benefits.” It stressed, “The tentative agreement has the full

support of both the union and company.”

Investors also expressed their enthusiasm, pushing CAT’s stock up nearly two percent on Wednesday, the highest rise in the Dow Jones index for the day.

Workers have reacted with legitimate hostility and distrust to the tentative agreement. On the Facebook page of UAW Local 751 in Decatur, Illinois, a number of workers asked why they had been given no information about a contract which will govern their lives for the next six years. John wrote, “How can we vote on something that we know nothing about...why the rush.” Julie commented, “So once again nothing to view or see...wow union...same crap. Bet it’s same again. BS.”

Pointing to the UAW’s reputation for fixing votes, Billy commented on a news article on the deal, “I will bet that the Hall will say that people should vote yes and then 90 percent will vote no but it will magically get the votes to pass.”

Seeking to placate workers’ anger over the lack of information and rush to vote, Local 751 announced Thursday that a “flyer” with “highlighted details” would be available to workers on March 23, three days before the vote. However, as both autoworkers at the Big Three and workers at John Deere can attest, such self-serving union “highlights” invariably conceal the most important concessions.

In 2015, the UAW made a similar effort to steamroll Fiat-Chrysler workers into voting on an agreement they hadn’t seen. However, facing widespread anger among workers and the demand raised by the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* that workers had a right to study the contract, the UAW grudgingly released the full 1,000-page agreement. When workers learned it maintained the hate two-tier system, along with containing significant attacks on health care, they proceeded to vote the deal down by a 65 percent margin, in the first defeat of a UAW-backed national contract since the 1970s.

Weeks later, in the second version of the contract

proposal—which preserved the essential demands of the company—the UAW was then caught omitting from its highlights an agreement doubling the percentage of temporary workers that Fiat-Chrysler could use.

Similarly, at Deere in 2015, the UAW gave workers just hours to look over phony highlights before voting. Despite widespread opposition by workers to the proposal, with some plants voting “no” by as much as 66 percent, the union claimed that it passed by 180 votes, then defied calls by workers for a recount.

Caterpillar has earned a reputation as a ruthless enemy of the working class. Experiencing record profits at the beginning of the decade, it nevertheless imposed brutal givebacks on workers in the previous UAW contract in 2011, including a wage freeze for senior workers and sharp increases in health care costs. Then UAW Secretary Treasurer and current UAW President Dennis Williams, who led the negotiations, praised the imposition of concessions, saying, “The ratification is particularly pleasing as it may have finally put the troublesome relationship between the UAW and CAT right where it belongs: behind us.”

Moreover, in 2012 the UAW assisted the International Association of Machinists in isolating and eventually defeating a strike by Caterpillar workers in Joliet, Illinois, forcing its members to handle parts produced by replacement workers. The outcome of that defeat has been the near-total elimination of manufacturing jobs at the plant.

While Caterpillar has in recent years faced a drop in profitability because of the global economic slump, they have continued to line the pockets of their executives and wealthy investors, paying former CEO Doug Oberhelman nearly \$17 million in 2015, and doling out roughly \$1.8 billion in dividends last year. Moreover, they have sought to prop up “shareholder value” through outright fraud and criminality, and are currently under investigation for hiding billions of profits in offshore subsidiaries.

For workers, however, the company motto remains “sacrifice,” which they have enacted in part through the layoff tens of thousands globally since the commodities and mining slowdown began.

According to the Decatur-based *Herald & Review*, the new UAW-Caterpillar agreement will cover just 5,000 workers at plants in Illinois and in York, Pennsylvania. If correct, this number would indicate a nearly 50 percent decline in the number of UAW members at Caterpillar over the last six years, and is a damning indictment of the union’s claim that the last brutal concessions contract would “save jobs.”

Perhaps nothing more clearly reveals the reactionary character of the UAW’s corporatist perspective than its attempts to promote illusions that President Trump, the fascist billionaire con-man, is a friend of the working class.

Almost simultaneously with the announcement of the tentative agreement with Caterpillar Wednesday, UAW President Williams, who played a key role in selling out the 1994-95 CAT strike as a UAW Region 4 official, appeared seated between Trump and Ford CEO Mark Fields as part of a panel in Ypsilanti, Michigan. The companies bused in workers to listen to Trump’s nationalist and militaristic diatribe later in the day, in which the president promoted the UAW’s “Buy American” campaign, and promised to slash corporate taxes and remove regulations impeding the profit drive by the auto companies.

The UAW, along with the AFL-CIO as a whole, have sought to forge an alliance with Trump on the basis of economic nationalism—the poisonous lie that workers and corporations in the US share the same interests, and that immigrants or foreign workers are the cause of plant closures and declining living standards. This campaign seeks to divert anger from the real culprit—capitalism, which exploits workers all over the globe.

Caterpillar workers have repeatedly demonstrated an immense militancy and willingness to fight.

However, the UAW has proven beyond doubt that it is worse than useless as a means to defend against the company’s rapacious demands. To wage a successful struggle, workers must form new organizations, rank-and-file committees which are democratically elected and which proceed not from what Caterpillar can “afford,” but from workers need.

Moreover, workers cannot fight against a corporate behemoth like Caterpillar—which has immense resources and the full backing of the Trump administration—alone. An appeal must be made to those facing similar attacks, including Illinois state workers, AT&T workers, and the tens of thousands of other Caterpillar workers in the US and throughout the world, to launch an international struggle in defense of good-paying jobs, decent living conditions, and social equality.

The fight to mobilize the strength of the working class in industrial action must be combined with a political struggle based on a break with the two parties of big business, the Democrats and Republicans and the building of a party of the working class armed with a socialist strategy.



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