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Caterpillar-UAW deal: Workers denounce information blackout

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With less than a week before a March 26 contract ratification vote, the United Auto Workers (UAW) union is maintaining an information blackout on the content of its tentative agreement with Caterpillar, the Peoria, Illinois-based construction and mining equipment giant.

The deal, announced last Wednesday, comes in the face of a growing determination by workers to fight against the relentless attacks on jobs and living standards, as evidenced by the 93 percent vote in favor of authorizing a strike. Despite this, the UAW ordered its members to continue working past the expiration of the previous contract on February 28.

The UAW is remaining silent because it does not want rank-and-file workers to have time to study the details of the deal and build up momentum to defeat the latest union-backed sellout. Instead, the UAW plans to release self-serving “highlights” just three days before Sunday’s ratification meetings.

Anger among workers at both Caterpillar and the UAW has been simmering for years, particularly following the 2011 UAW-negotiated contract, and is now reaching a boiling point. Even though the company experienced near-record profitability at the time of the previous contract negotiations, it extracted massive concessions from workers through the connivance of the UAW, including a wage freeze for older workers and attacks on pensions and health care.

Caterpillar continued its brutal campaign of layoffs and plant closures over the weekend, announcing that it was closing a plant that employs 75 in Elkader, a small town of just 1,200 in northeastern Iowa. Janice Walkers, a company spokesperson, coldly noted, “The actions taken today will help optimize current and future manufacturing operations and leverage the existing support structure in order to make the best use of manufacturing capacity.” She added, “Caterpillar knows this is difficult for its employees and their families, but steps must be taken to position the

company for long-term success.”

Reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* recently spoke with workers at the Aurora, Illinois, Caterpillar plant in the outlying Chicago suburbs, and distributed the statement “UAW-Caterpillar deal: An anti-worker conspiracy.” The statement asserts that workers have the right to study the full contract—not just the marketing “highlights” cherry-picked by the UAW—and that they must have at least two weeks to discuss the document and organize opposition to the company’s demands.

“The thing is, we don’t know what’s going on,” said Mike, a worker with 12 years at the plant. “I think it’s a set-up with the union and Caterpillar. We got to go into the contract vote, and we don’t know what was offered, what Caterpillar turned down, what even the union brought up. We don’t know anything. So all they’re going to say is, ‘Take this.’”

“Everything that Caterpillar does is ‘in the contract,’ they [the UAW] always say, and it’s stuff that they’ve never done before. My question is, how many blank pages do you all have in there?”

Mike discussed the continual deterioration of working conditions at the plant. “We have no sick days. If you’re sick, you have to go the doctor. Even if you have a headache or something, you can’t just call in without going to the doctor.”

A young worker with six years at the plant said, “The union sucks. They haven’t told us anything. I don’t know what’s in the contract. All I know is we’re supposed to receive some kind of highlights of the contract a few days before we vote.”

Steve, a worker at the Caterpillar plant in Decatur in central Illinois, spoke with the *Autoworker Newsletter* by telephone, saying, “I think your article was spot on. A lot of people agree with what you said, that the bargaining committee is hiding what’s in the contract because they know we’d vote against it if we knew what’s in it. I think

the only reason they're releasing the highlights is because so many people were pissed off and complained.

"I've been there over 20 years, and it's gotten worse and worse day by day. In the last contract, our insurance practically doubled. I lost my pension last year and got thrown into a 401(k). We get treated terribly, and there's no end in sight."

Steve said the plant employed about 1,200 when he first started. "Now there's just about 700. They were maxed out on temps, I think at about 20 percent, when times were booming. Then they got rid of them all when the mining downturn happened. They say they're going to start hiring again soon, and it'll be all supplemental [temporary workers] again."

The UAW has opposed any struggle to protect workers against the thousands of layoffs Caterpillar has carried out since the commodities slump began. While the 2011 UAW contract covered roughly 9,500, the Decatur *Herald and Review* has reported that the current agreement will apply to just 5,000, nearly a third of what the UAW membership was at the company in the early 1990s.

"The UAW is guilty of misleading its members. We pay dues to the UAW for their support but the only thing they care about is how many dues-paying members they have."

Steve referred to the experience of the 1994-1995 strike, the betrayal by the UAW, and the role of Dennis Williams, then a UAW Region 4 official and now the national UAW president. "He's a weasel. He'll sell you down the road to make his job better. I remember him sitting at a meeting with the other members of the executive, and he was telling everybody, 'This is what you have to take.' People were livid. We were in a gymnasium, and the back doors were open and you could see cars idling ready to swipe the officials out of there if things got out of hand. It was like something out of a movie."

While the tentative agreement with Caterpillar was being announced last week, Williams was appearing on a panel at the shuttered Willow Run auto plant with President Trump and Ford CEO Mark Fields. Williams promoted the UAW's reactionary "Buy American" campaign and Trump's economic nationalist agenda, both of which strive to pit workers in the US against their class brothers and sisters in other countries, while also seeking to subordinate them to the profit interests of American corporations.

"Caterpillar and the UAW seem to be in bed with each other, and the unions are big business too," Steve continued. "When you look at the salaries of the officials, it's out of this world."

David, another worker at the Aurora plant, said, "The UAW is carrying out a complete blackout and we aren't being told anything. My father started working here 22 years

ago and he hasn't gotten a raise since 1994. He's basically making half the money he used to make as a machinist. With this new contract, it may be three or four years before he gets his own pension. He's worried about money and retirement.

"We have a right to study the whole contract. The UAW canceled the one meeting we were supposed to have and it was done specifically so nobody could ask any questions. I think it's BS but it's typical. This is what they do. The UAW didn't even tell us it was a six-year contract. We heard that from the newspapers here."

David also spoke about the Caterpillar tax fraud investigation and the role of both big business parties in defending the interests of the ruling class. He said, "The investigation into Caterpillar shows what corporations do. They will try to make as much money as possible and the laws benefit them. We make the tractors and we make the money and they get the profits off us. Middle management will also make all the money they want to off us. They take the money and run. They don't care about us, they just care about money."

Caterpillar is seeking to use its vast wealth and political connections in attempt to circumvent fallout over accusations of blatant tax fraud and the IRS's demand that the company pay over \$2 billion in back-taxes and penalties. Last week, it was announced that the company had hired William Barr, who served as US attorney general under George H.W. Bush and later as general counsel to telecom giant Verizon, to lead its defense case.

"We have been getting screwed by the top 1 percent for the past 30 or 40 years," David continued. "Donald Trump scares the crap out of me. But look at Obama: he said every man and woman would be out of Iraq and Afghanistan. It never happened. Both parties take the money from the same people. They owe the same people favors. It doesn't matter who wins. I'm getting screwed."

"Look at the police now. They are militarized and you can't even protest anymore. The ruling class wants to take away whole chunks from us. At some point, it will get to the breaking point, when they grab too much power, and they will push everybody to a full-blown revolt."



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