

“Don’t believe what they’re going to tell you”

As Caterpillar-UAW contract vote nears, Deere workers warn of union betrayal

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Just four days remain before several thousand workers will vote Sunday, March 26, on a contract between the United Auto Workers (UAW) union and Caterpillar, the earthmoving equipment giant. And yet, workers remain completely in the dark about content of the deal the UAW wants them to vote for.

Caterpillar and the UAW have been in negotiations since January 4, and ostensibly reached a deal on the six-year proposal on Wednesday, March 15. Throughout the entire process, the UAW has refused to release any details to its members and has coordinated a “media blackout” with the company. Facing angry demands by workers last week for information, the union has sought to buy time by stating that it will release a “highlights” flyer tomorrow, three days before the vote.

The inescapable conclusion is that the UAW is seeking to force through yet another sellout. Their main concern is if workers were given the full contract and the time to study it, they would reject it decisively.

Caterpillar workers should take as a warning the experience of workers at Deere & Co., the agricultural equipment maker, in 2015. As Brian, a second-tier worker at Deere, told the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* in an interview, “Deere workers are really upset over our last contract vote. They should have been briefing workers every week at least on the details of the contract negotiations, but they didn’t. It goes to show how corrupt our union is. Why would they even think to do such a thing? To keep workers in the dark. They did it to us and they’re doing it to the CAT workers.”

Warning CAT workers, Brian stressed, “Beware. Don’t believe what they’re going to tell you. Vote no.

You never vote for the first deal anyway. They’ve got a scare tactic right now. It’s all doom and gloom before the contract. They do it on purpose to intimidate workers into voting yes.”

Penny, another Deere worker in Iowa, added, “To the Caterpillar workers, look everything over and over. Then ask your local leadership why did they bring back this contract, and make them answer and not justify it with a roundabout answer.”

In 2015, the UAW nearly “lost control of its membership,” as the corporate press put it, as workers were determined to call a halt to decades of lost wages and deteriorating living standards, carried out universally with the support of the unions.

First, Fiat Chrysler workers rebelled against the UAW’s attempts to steamroll them into a “yes” vote, and demanded to be given the whole contract. When the union finally relented, workers shared information and discussed it on social media, and then voted by nearly two-thirds to reject the deal, which maintained the two-tier system, contained plans to eviscerate health care and expanded the number of temporary workers.

Following that setback, the union sought to isolate 11,000 Deere workers, whose contract was also expiring that fall, from workers at the Big Three auto companies. Announcing a tentative agreement with Deere on October 1, minutes after the midnight expiration of the previous contract, the union called for a snap vote for October 4. Workers were given a “highlights” flyer at the door of the ratification meeting and forced to vote on it following a marketing pitch by the union.

The “highlights” read like a brochure from the company human resources department. While revealing

little of the substance of the contract, it sought to conceal painful concessions. Under the euphemistic heading of “Health Care Protected,” for example, it was shown that copayments for doctor’s visits and prescription drugs would double or even triple over the life of the contract.

In another section on the implementation of a punitive “corrective action plan” for employee absences, the union once again demonstrated its role as an organization that disciplines workers and enforces the profit interests of the company, writing, “Unplanned absenteeism has a significant, negative impact on employee safety and morale, the quality of our products, and overall productivity.”

The contract also maintained the hated two-tier wage system, first implemented by Deere and the UAW in the 1990s, and included “wage increases” that were de facto wage cuts when taking inflation into account.

“During every contract negotiation since I’ve started they’ve talked about ending the two-tiers wages,” Brian said. “The fact of the matter is, I’m still second-wage and I always will be under the UAW.”

“During the highlights meeting, a union representative told us we would be receiving ‘pre-97’ wages in the new contract. I knew he was lying and I called him out on it. The truth was, under the new contract, it would take another six years to make what workers were making pre-1997. In addition, the new contract left us with far worse health insurance!”

As the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* noted at the time in the statement Reject UAW deal to ram through sellout agreement!, “Nobody would buy a house if they were given only a couple of hours to examine it, let alone only a brochure of ‘highlights’ prepared by some real estate agent who stood to make a lot of money. It would be no less mad for workers to accept the word of Norwood Jewell and the rest of the UAW, who also have a business interest in swindling them into buying this deal.”

While the UAW falsely claimed that there were “many improvements” for members in the deal, the real pro-corporate character of their efforts was summed up by their elation over the fact that it would give “Deere & Company the necessary tools to grow its business.”

Despite the union’s best efforts to force a vote through by keeping its real character from workers, there was nonetheless widespread opposition, with the

union claiming a “yes” vote by a margin of 180 votes, out of a total of over 7,500. Angry and suspicious at the outcome, Deere workers demanded a recount, but were inevitably stonewalled by the UAW.

“Keep an eye on the votes,” Brian concluded. “Our contract was suspiciously ratified with 51.5 percent of workers allegedly voting yes and 48.5 percent voting no.”

Since the UAW forced the contract through, Deere has been given a free hand to expand job cuts and other cost-cutting measures. Within months of the ratification, hundreds of workers were laid off at plants in Dubuque and Davenport, Iowa, and Moline, Illinois. Between 2014 and 2016, the company laid off approximately 2,000 workers.

Chris, another Deere worker from Iowa, told the *Autoworker Newsletter*, “Every worker has the right to review the agreement in its entirety and should be given a sufficient amount of time to review and discuss it. This can be easily accomplished by making the tentative agreement accessible by a PDF file. Both company and union representatives cloak the tentative agreement in secrecy to promote a ratification. This is a complete infringement to democratic process. Furthermore, it is a direct violation of section 301 of the Labor Management Relations Act of 1947. Also, according to contract law, each member has the right to question the validity of the tentative agreement.”

Referring to the role of the Socialist Equality Party and the *Autoworker Newsletter* in the struggle over the contract in 2015, Chris added, “Honestly, you guys were the only ones giving us a voice during our contract negotiations and afterwards. A lot of us appreciate the hard work the WSWS are doing for labor. Thank you.”



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