

After unexplained delay, UAW claims ratification of Caterpillar deal

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After an unexplained delay of 16-17 hours, the UAW announced late Monday afternoon that Caterpillar workers in Illinois and Pennsylvania had approved a new six-year labor contract with the giant mining and earth-moving equipment corporation. The alleged passage of the deal, which was announced in a perfunctory press release that included no vote details, has provoked anger and suspicion from Caterpillar workers.

The contract proposal faced strong opposition from rank-and-file workers, many of whom have gone without a wage increase for a decade. The agreement, which was unanimously backed by the UAW bargaining committees, maintains the two-tier wage system first imposed by the UAW in 2005, increases out-of-pocket health care expenses and sanctions the closure of the Aurora, Illinois plant, wiping out 800 jobs. To add insult to injury, the UAW tried to ram the vote through Sunday, only days after releasing its self-serving “highlights” of the deal.

At ratification meetings in the Illinois cities of Peoria, Decatur and Aurora, workers angrily confronted local UAW officials trying to sell the deal. Many wore “Vote No” buttons and T-shirts expressing determination to recoup lost wages and benefits from the corporation, which has made record profits over the last decade and has richly rewarded its top executives and shareholders. The company is currently the target of an FBI investigation for stashing away billions in offshore tax shelters, although it is expected to greatly benefit from Trump’s corporate tax and infrastructure proposals.

The UAW initially announced that it would release the results hours after voting by an estimated 5,000 workers concluded on Sunday night. However, in an unprecedented move it abruptly reversed itself and announced that a tally would not be made public until some time Monday.

“There’s always suspicion about the UAW,” Renee, a veteran Caterpillar worker in Peoria, told the WSWS

Autoworker Newsletter. “Is it not suspicious that they give you only the ‘highlights’ three days before you vote? And the ‘highlights’ didn’t say diddly either.

“There was lots of hostility yesterday at the ratification votes,” Renee continued, “the most I’ve ever seen. The workers are just as ticked at the UAW as they are at CAT. The union is in bed with the company, just like politicians.

“Caterpillar talks about their shareholders and how much they make per quarter, but it’s always at the cost of the employees. Over at the Morton parts plant, they have dwindled us down to where you literally have to cut corners to get the job done. Safety is just out the window. They don’t care about the people. We’re just numbers; we can be moved around and replaced.”

“There was a lot of tension at work today due to not releasing the totals,” said Steve, a worker at the Decatur plant. “The longer we waited, the worse the conspiracy was getting in our minds. It’s not hard to count 5,000 votes if everybody voted.

“Our election was very strange. You used to present your name and ID and go to a booth where they would check you off. This time there were four tables where they crossed you off. If you wanted, you could go to each table and get a ballot.

“We also only voted on the central agreement, not our local agreement. I’ve never seen it that way. I questioned them at the meeting, and they said the local language had been settled. It was odd to me, but everything in this contract has been odd.

“It’s horrible the way the UAW has played first-tier and second-tier workers against each other. Some second-tier workers were saying the first didn’t deserve a raise even though we haven’t had one in years. All the UAW wants is dues money, and to keep as many members as they can no matter how little they make. That’s how the fat cats keep their jobs. The UAW is just as bad as CAT, but

we're paying them to take care of us and they're not. It was clear from the letter from [UAW Vice President] Norwood Jewell, who said things are tough on CAT and we can't expect a lot this contract cycle. He's just a PR man for the company.

"There's a lot of orders coming in now, and they're hiring people. I think the contract allows up to 20 percent of the workforce to be supplemental employees, or temps, and they have a wave of them coming in next Monday, making \$12 or \$13 an hour. Damn, they are talking about a \$15 minimum wage at McDonald's, and these guys are getting less for building giant mining trucks."

The Facebook page of the Decatur local had posts from several workers raising concerns over the delay, with one worker commenting, "They are figuring out how to get the outcome they want."

The UAW press release, issued at 3:51 p.m. Eastern Time, read: "UAW members at Caterpillar voted on Sunday, March 26th, to ratify their tentative Central Agreement. All local agreements have been ratified except UAW Local 974 Peoria. UAW Local 974 has rescheduled their supplemental local agreement vote for April 1, 2017. UAW members should check for the location and time with their local union."

A call from the *World Socialist Web Site* to UAW Communications Director Brian Rothenberg's office seeking an explanation for the delay and more details on the vote was not returned.

The *Peoria Journal Star* reported Monday afternoon that 55 percent of those local members who voted opposed the contract, while 45 percent were in favor, according to a letter with the figures issued by UAW Local 974.

UAW Local 751 in Decatur reported that the deal passed by a 60-40 margin, with some 500 out of the more than 700 workers voting. On the local's Facebook page, the local said the ratification bonuses of Decatur workers hinged on the passage of the local contract by Peoria workers, members of UAW 974, this Sunday. Workers responded angrily to this blackmail, saying the UAW highlights brochure said the \$3,000 ratification bonus went into effect if the entire bargaining committee backed the deal, which they did.

Company officials predictably hailed the agreement. "Overall, we are happy with today's vote to ratify a new six-year labor agreement, which provides competitive wages and benefits for our employees and their families," said Jon Ginzel, Caterpillar Director of Labor Relations.

Workers at Ford and farm equipment maker John Deere

also spoke to the *Autoworker Newsletter*. During contract battles at these companies in 2015, there were widespread accusations that the UAW committed vote fraud to ram through rotten agreements against the will of workers.

Brian, a John Deere worker from Iowa, said, "During the time of the 2015 Deere contract vote, every person I spoke to said they voted the contract down, and yet it still went through. There's so much corruption. The unions are in deep with the government and the corporations. I mean, just listen to the way the higher-ups talk. 'You don't want to strike, we did it 30 years ago!'"

"Well look at where we are now. We're still on the two-tier wages. There is something clearly wrong here. Companies like Deere and Caterpillar are making plenty of money, even with Caterpillar's finance troubles with the government. They'll be fine. Especially with Trump in office, they're going to let them do whatever they want."

"Deere management always tries to convince us that Caterpillar is our competition, but that has nothing to do with us. Caterpillar workers are not my competitors. Who's profiting the most? Stockholders and executives, not the workers."

Frank, a Ford worker at the Dearborn Assembly Plant outside Detroit, said, "This certainly sounds familiar. Everybody should stand up and say we want a recount and a third-party observer. They need to show the membership check-off lists that they used to hand out and collect the ballots to make sure the two numbers are the same."

"It's crazy that the UAW announced that it passed without putting out any of the numbers. The fact that this has happened at Ford, Deere and now Caterpillar shows the disconnect between the agenda of the UAW International and the membership."



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