

Caterpillar workers react with anger, suspicion to UAW contract ratification

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Workers have reacted with anger and suspicion to the United Auto Workers' (UAW) announcement Monday afternoon that Caterpillar workers ratified a new six-year contract with the transnational construction and mining equipment maker. The announcement came after an unprecedented delay of nearly a day following the vote, despite workers being told that the results would be available later in the evening Sunday. The union has offered no explanation for the delay.

The agreement, worked out by the UAW and Caterpillar after weeks of secret negotiations, faced widespread opposition from workers and was denounced by many as a sellout. The union sought to overcome opposition by keeping the contents of the whole deal concealed, only releasing misleading "highlights" a few days before the vote. However, even the highlights revealed that the contract freezes the wages for older workers, includes increased out-of-pocket health care costs, and sanctions new jobs losses like the closure of the Aurora, Illinois plant that will cut 800 jobs.

The same day the ratification was announced, Caterpillar revealed that it was continuing its global attack on jobs apace, stating that plans for the shutdown of its plant in Charleroi, Belgium had been finalized. The closure of the factory, which has operated for over 50 years, will throw some 2,000 workers onto the unemployment lines, adding to the more than 16,000 job cuts the company has carried out around the world since 2015.

The new contract will cover 5,000 UAW members at 11 facilities in Illinois and Pennsylvania. This number is down by nearly half since the last contract in 2011.

The UAW did not release any vote totals in its statement on the results, writing only that "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." That local, which is the UAW's largest at Caterpillar with several thousand workers in central Illinois, posted on its web site that workers rejected the tentative agreement by 55 percent. Local 974 officials did not release the actual vote totals either.

Workers in Peoria were told they would have to vote again Saturday, April 1, on the local agreement, which will remain unchanged even though they voted it down Sunday along with the national agreement.

If Peoria rejected the company-wide contract by 55 percent, the next largest locals would have had to substantially vote in favor of the deal for it to have passed overall. Decatur and Aurora each

employ between 700-800 workers, out of a total of approximately 5,000 workers covered by the UAW-Caterpillar contract.

No percentages or totals have been released for Aurora, which is targeted for closure later this year. Workers at Decatur reported that the UAW had announced that the vote was 60 percent in favor there.

Caterpillar executives quickly hailed the passage of the deal Monday afternoon. Jon Ginzel, Caterpillar's director of labor relations, stated, "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."

In a pointed directive to UAW executives in Detroit, Ginzel added, "We expect the UAW to work closely with the UAW Local 974 to achieve a ratified local contract shortly."

Many workers took to social media following the ratification announcement to denounce the outcome, with some changing their profile pictures to show images of their "no" ballots. "All locals should have voted this contract down," wrote Frankie on the Facebook page of UAW Local 751 in Decatur.

Others demanded to know the company-wide votes and raised suspicions over the delay in announcing the results. "What were the vote percentages, each local has a right to know how the voting turned out, to leave the membership in the dark for 24 hours and not say one word about what was going on doesn't sit well with me," wrote Gordy.

A worker from the smaller York, Pennsylvania plant (the only remaining plant outside Illinois still covered by a UAW agreement) pointed to intimidation tactics by the union in securing a "yes" vote: "We had an 80% yes 20% no, with the total numbers coming in at 72 yes votes and 18 no votes. Which wasn't surprising to me sadly, considering the majority of people questioning the contract were shouted down, browbeat, and ridiculed. Good times."

Workers who spoke with the WSWs *Autoworker Newsletter* also questioned the legitimacy of the vote and expressed opposition to the terms of the agreement.

"The union is clearly simply sending us back to the polls until we get it right," said Darren, a veteran worker in Peoria. "I suspect the Local 974 margin was significantly against the contract and the International won't stand for such intransigence. I also expect the other locals' votes were, at best, close to defeat if not actually defeated and the results falsified, which might explain the union's unwillingness to share those tallies as they might influence the 're-

vote' in Peoria.”

Darren referred to the use of lump-sum incentives in lieu of base wage increases to entice workers to approve the deal. “It surprises me that it would be that close. However, there are a lot of older workers at the Mapleton Foundry with enough time to retire who would be sorely tempted by the \$10,000 retirement bonus. I didn’t get the impression the younger ones were the least bit impressed with the \$3,000 signing bonus.”

Other workers in Peoria denounced the deal and expressed anger at having to vote again. “Just another sellout contract,” said Bruce. “What’s the point of another vote? They already said it’s ratified. Never seen this.”

A worker at the Decatur, Illinois plant told the *Autoworker Newsletter*, “Well plant-wide here is so pissed off. When I went to the [union] hall the Friday before asking for a complete copy of the changes from old to new contract they claimed they couldn’t provide that, but if I had a certain question I could ask and they could help. So, I asked again regarding the labor laws saying they have to provide [the agreement] and they said no one has that information. Only in the highlights.”

“Personally, I don’t know what happened. The committee that does the bargaining doesn’t count the votes, but then again, why wait to release the results? They had the results at 6 p.m. Sunday.

“There was a moment in the Sunday meeting that just literally about cleared the table. A gentleman my fellow coworkers call Rambo went to the mic. He wanted a show of hands [from the local officials] on who was voting for this contract and the reaction was hilarious. They looked around at each other like school kids. ‘You raise your hand and I will.’ They all did (bargaining committee only), the other people on the board would not raise their hands because they knew it was a crap deal. The worst part was they felt threatened by what our union brother did and sent the guards on him. That was low.”

While UAW has collaborated with its “corporate partners” since the late 1970s in forcing givebacks on workers, a definite modus operandi has emerged since the 2015 contracts at Detroit’s Big Three automakers and agricultural equipment maker Deere & Co. Contract negotiations are typically preceded by company announcements of plant closures or mass layoffs and declarations that “difficult market conditions” or “international competition” even when companies are profitable, require a further lowering of labor costs. The UAW uses this to browbeat workers determined to recoup past concessions.

Ignoring overwhelming strike votes, the UAW keeps workers in the dark and on the job by extending contract deadlines before it announces a deal, which is generally only the “framework” of a contract, not a real agreement. It then seeks to withhold any details on the deal, typically only presenting to workers deceptive “highlights” just before voting. At Caterpillar, it was a few days before the vote, and at Deere in 2015, not until the vote itself.

The “union” seeks to further divide first-tier and second-tier workers and then exploit the economic difficulties caused by its own past betrayals by offering signing bonuses for workers to “sign” away their futures. Voting is then carried out in an atmosphere of intimidation and even when there is overwhelming and visible opposition, the union invariably says the deal has

passed. When workers make accusations of vote rigging and demand a recount they are ignored.

Only after the contract is rammed through, the UAW hopes, will workers discover the full extent of the attacks on their jobs, wages and working conditions.

The universal secrecy, deceit and general contempt for democratic process points inexorably to the fact that the UAW does not function as a defender, even in a limited fashion, of workers’ needs. Rather, as with the rest of the unions, it functions as management’s enforcer and labor police force to suppress the resistance of workers to corporate dictates.

Under both big-business parties, workers have seen their living standards erode for decades due to the treachery of these anti-working class organizations, with a sharp acceleration of this process under President Obama, who worked with the UAW to expand the two-tier system and slash a new generation of autoworkers’ wages in half.

As the Caterpillar contract betrayal reveals, the assault on workers will continue and increase under President Trump, who has pledged to slash corporate taxes, eviscerate social programs, and lift all restraints on corporate profit-making. Far from giving the UAW pause, it has instead sought to form a de facto alliance with the billionaire president, promising to support his reactionary “Buy American” nationalism, which pits American workers against their brothers and sisters in other countries in a race to the bottom.

If workers are to halt the destruction of the gains won over generations of struggle, a new strategy is needed, one that opposes the corporatist and nationalist program of the UAW and other company-controlled unions. In every factory and workplace workers should elect rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves and committed to fighting for the interests of workers, not the profits of the corporate bosses.

These committees should establish lines of communication with other sections of workers—at Deere, the auto companies, with Illinois state workers, teachers and others, in the US and internationally—to organize an industrial and political counteroffensive to defend workers’ social rights to jobs, wages, pensions, health care, and more.

The WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* is holding a phone-in conference on Wednesday, March 29, to discuss this perspective and organize this struggle. We urge all workers to attend.

To participate, call 213-416-1560 in the US or 438-800-2937 in Canada and enter PIN 581991086#.



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