Allegations of vote fraud mount

The UAW betrayal at Caterpillar and the case for rank-and-file committees

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Caterpillar workers in the United States are the latest to bear the brunt of a corrupt and rotten sellout organized by the United Auto Workers (UAW). Earlier this week, the UAW pushed through a new six-year labor agreement that will escalate the destruction of jobs, increase health care costs and extend a freeze in real wages for senior workers to a decade and a half.

The UAW pursued a now well-worn strategy to impose management's dictates against a resistant workforce. First it defied a 93 percent strike vote and kept workers on the job two weeks before announcing a deal. Then it held a vote before workers could study the contract. After workers protested, it released bogus "highlights" that concealed the content of the deal, echoed management's lies that declining sales made any real improvement in wages unaffordable, and used a threat to close the Aurora plant and cut jobs to browbeat workers.

Despite this, workers were in no mood to accept more concessions from a company that had made record profits in the years following the last contract in 2011, which eliminated defined benefit pensions. While the company was demanding more sacrifice from workers, it was rewarding its top investors and executives, stashing away billions in an offshore account and giving its former CEO Doug Oberhelman a golden parachute worth at least $31 million.

Many workers went to the ratification meetings on March 26 determined to defeat the sellout and came away confident that they had done so. Then, in an unprecedented and still unexplained action, the UAW executives delayed the release of the results after initially saying they would be made public hours after voting concluded.

After nearly a full day, the UAW issued a perfunctory press release, declaring "UAW members at Caterpillar voted on Sunday, March 26th, to ratify their tentative Central Agreement." The statement did not include a breakdown of the vote by numbers or percentages.

Workers reacted with anger and suspicion. UAW Local 974 in Peoria, Illinois, the largest local with more than half of the total number of eligible votes, acknowledged that workers voted down the deal by a 55-45 percent margin. In Decatur, Illinois workers denounced claims by local officials that the deal had passed by a 60-40 margin.

"There is no way the contract passed in Decatur," a CAT worker told the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter*. "I thought the delay was because the contract was overturned at all the plants. My main concern now is how to get a recount."

"I suspect the Local 974 margin was significantly against the contract, and the International won't stand for such intransigence," a veteran worker in Peoria told the WSWS. "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…"

What is so striking is just how brazen the UAW functionaries are in their manipulation and outright fraud. As the saying goes, desperate times require desperate measures. The longstanding effort of the UAW to force through pro-company contracts is facing growing opposition as workers, who have nothing left to lose, attempt to fight back.

In September 2015, 40,000 Fiat Chrysler workers defeated a UAW-backed agreement by a 2-to-1 margin, rejecting a national auto contract for the first time in 30 years. After confronting this angry insurrection, the UAW evidently concluded that, by hook or by crook, it would not allow something similar to happen again.

Later in the same round of contract negotiations in 2015, the UAW averted an imminent defeat of its contract with Ford when it miraculously discovered just enough votes at the very last local—at the Rouge complex in suburban Detroit—to declare that the contract had passed nationally by 51 to 49 percent.

A challenge to the vote by a skilled trades worker at the Dearborn Truck Assembly Plant uncovered damning evidence of vote rigging, including fraudulent photocopying

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of unnumbered ballots. His repeated demands for an investigation and revote were stonewalled by the UAW, which cynically claimed that overturning the fraudulent vote would violate the democratic rights of the members!

Similar charges of fraud were made by John Deere workers in October 2015 after the UAW claimed the contract at that company had passed even though workers at the two major factories in Iowa—with well over a third of the eligible voters—defeated the deal by a two-to-one margin. Once again, the UAW rejected demands for a recount.

Such behavior is characteristic not of a "workers' organization," but an assemblage of company agents. The UAW is not a "union" in any meaningful sense of the term. It is a tool of the corporate bosses who rely on and pay the UAW executives well to impose their dictates on the working class. If workers are too stubborn to vote "the right way," then it is left up to the UAW to find some way to say that they did.

To fight back, workers need organizations that represent their interests. The UAW does not unite workers, it divides them. It does not fight for higher wages and benefits, but works to impose lower wages and cuts to health care and pensions. It does not organize opposition; it organizes defeats. Like the entire AFL-CIO and Change to Win apparatus, the UAW is a corporatist syndicate and cheap labor contractor.

To defend their interests, workers must build new, fighting organizations, democratically controlled by the workers themselves.

Rank-and-file committees should be elected in every factory. These committees should bar UAW officials from their meetings and social media pages so they can have a free discussion without the interference of company agents and spies.

Rank-and-file factory committees will create the basis for a genuine unification of workers. They will establish lines of communication across all industries and workplaces to bring together all workers, black, white and immigrant, in the United States and internationally, in a common struggle to assert our social rights against the insatiable appetites of the super-rich.

The formation of rank-and-file committees is a necessary foundation for a fight back. Such a struggle, however, will immediately raise broader political issues. The actions of the UAW itself are rooted in its defense of the capitalist system, an economic system based on the exploitation of the working class to deliver profits to the corporate and financial elite.

For decades, the unions have worked to subordinate workers to the capitalist system through their political alliance with the Democratic Party. Since the election of the Republican Trump, the unions—with the UAW at their head—have joined the billionaire president's crusade to "Make America Great Again" by slashing corporate taxes and regulations, destroying public education, health care and Social Security, and squeezing even more profit out of the hides of workers.

At the same time, Trump and the unions want to dupe workers into believing that Mexico and China are responsible for unemployment and poverty so that they can drag workers behind a trade war and even bloodier shooting wars. Workers must reject these lies. As the shutdown of Caterpillar's plant in Belgium and the frame-up and persecution of the Maruti Suzuki autoworkers in India demonstrates, the global corporations and their political hirelings in every country are waging a class war against workers.

The development of a counteroffensive will thrust workers in a direct conflict with all the political institutions controlled by the capitalist exploiters, from the courts and police to the politicians of both big-business parties, Democratic and Republican.

Open class struggle is already reemerging, in the United States and around the world. To carry out this struggle, workers need independent organizations. To lead this struggle, they need a political party. This party is the Socialist Equality Party.

The SEP calls on workers at Caterpillar, at John Deere, at the Big Three auto companies and beyond to contact us for assistance in the development of rank-and-file committees and to build a mass political movement for socialism, for workers' power and the reorganization of economic life to meet human needs, not private profit.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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