

Days after UAW claims contract ratification

Caterpillar confirms plans to close Aurora, Illinois plant, lay off 800

Marcus Day
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Caterpillar, the global construction and mining equipment giant, confirmed Friday afternoon that it plans to shut down production at its Aurora, Illinois, plant, by the end of 2018. The factory closure means the loss of jobs for some 800 workers.

In a company press release, Denise Johnson, group president of the company's Resource Industries division, stated, "Moving production from Aurora to other existing facilities allows Caterpillar to efficiently leverage manufacturing space while still preserving capacity for an upturn." Feigning sympathy for the hundreds who are to be deprived of their jobs, she added, "Supporting impacted employees through this transition is a top priority, as we know these actions are difficult for our talented and dedicated people."

According to the statement, roughly 1,200 nonproduction employees involved with engineering and product support will remain at the Aurora facility (technically located in the neighboring city of Montgomery). Neither the United Auto Workers union (UAW) executives in Detroit nor Aurora's UAW Local 145 have commented on the planned closure and layoffs.

The announcement comes just four days after the UAW claimed that workers ratified a new six-year contract with the company, covering some 5,000 workers at multiple plants in Illinois and one in Pennsylvania. It further confirms the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter's* assessment that the deal—worked out in secret negotiations with the company and whose full contents have still not been revealed—is yet the latest sellout orchestrated by the UAW, escalating the corporate assault on workers' jobs, wages, benefits and working conditions.

As with UAW-brokered contracts at agriculture equipment maker Deere & Co. and the Big Three auto companies in 2015, workers have raised questions about the legitimacy of the union's claims that the contract was ratified, with some calling for a recount. The UAW has provided as little information as possible about the ratification, which followed an unprecedented and still unexplained delay of the release of the vote tally.

The UAW claimed the contract passed overall, despite admitting that the largest local in Peoria voted it down. A week

later, the union has yet to release a company-wide breakdown of the vote, either by percentage or numbers.

After workers at Local 974 in Peoria initially voted down both the national and local agreement, the UAW called a snap vote for April 1, forcing workers to vote again on the same local agreement they had just rejected. The union sought to place additional pressure on its members in Peoria, and isolate remaining opposition, by telling workers at other plants that their signing bonuses hinged on the approval of the final local agreement.

This time, the union was swift in claiming a ratification of the local agreement, writing in a perfunctory statement hours after the vote, "Members of UAW Caterpillar Local 974 in Peoria, Illinois, in a vote Saturday, have overwhelmingly ratified their local agreement. This is the final step in the ratification process of the recent round of UAW Caterpillar collective bargaining agreements."

"As far as any of us were told the only issues involved in the local contract were largely technical to the union itself," a veteran worker in Peoria told the *WSWS*. "The number and distribution of committeemen, which facilities would fall under which business unit, etc."

The worker referred to the "flexible" character of the contract from the company and union's standpoint, and the major concessions often contained in unofficial memoranda, saying, "Overall none of the voting really matters. Nothing in the contract, local or central, is set in stone. A 'Letter of Agreement' (LoA) can change or do away with any portion of the contract at the company's and the union's whim. The rank and file are not notified changes are in the offing and LoAs require no rank-and-file approval. How or when that little provision was adopted I don't know. Most of the most painful, damnable changes have come through LoAs, not negotiated contracts."

He continued, "The Aurora situation is typical Caterpillar operating procedure. If you look at all of Cat's actions regarding plant closures, relocations, labor reductions and so on in just the last 25 years one couldn't help but think that the people at the executive level were, apart from cynical and cruel,

either mad or schizophrenic. There is no long-term plan despite what they tell everyone. They make decisions almost spasmodically in their obsessive, nearly slavish, attempts to keep majority investors swimming in cash, and themselves swimming in bonuses for their 'foresight.' They have wasted untold millions of dollars and ruined thousands of lives."

As has now become standard practice in the stage-managed contract talks between corporations and their servants in the union apparatus, Caterpillar had preceded the opening of negotiations in January by announcing the possible closure of the Aurora plant, seeking to intimidate workers at the outset and beat back their demands to recoup lost wages and benefits. With the connivance of the UAW, they also sought to divide workers in one plant against another, holding open the possibility that the Decatur, Illinois, factory might add some of the jobs that Aurora loses.

"Out of about 800 production positions, about 500 positions would likely be added to Decatur and about 150 positions would be added in North Little Rock [Arkansas]," Caterpillar spokesperson Lisa Miller said Friday. Indicating that many of the new jobs at those plants may never materialize, she added, "We anticipate some will move to various suppliers and some positions would also be eliminated."

The closure of the Aurora plant comes as part of Caterpillar's global restructuring campaign, which has sought to place the full burden of the economic downturn on the backs of workers internationally, despite having accumulated tens of billions in profits over the last decade. After laying off over 16,000 and closing numerous plants in the last two years alone, the company also announced last week that it had finalized plans to close its facility in Charleroi, Belgium, wiping out 2,000 more jobs.

Mike, a worker at the Aurora plant, told the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* in an interview that the company set up stages in the plant Friday morning before making the announcement later in the afternoon. "When they set up the stages, it isn't good news. Everybody walked out of there real quiet. The couple people that were talking, it was just disgust. If they knew all the time, they could've just told us."

He said there were angry confrontations between workers and local UAW officials following the announcement. "There was a guy at the hall going off on the former president, just cussing him out, saying, 'Who are you? We don't know you? You all don't even come on the floor.'"

Referring to the uncertainty surrounding the plant closure and the severance payout promoted in the union's contract "highlights," he said, "It's a whole smoke and mirrors game. We don't know exactly how long we have, or how long we have to stay to get a payout. We don't know any of the stipulations on getting the full severance package. They might say we need to be there four months, or more."

Mike said that Local 145 had yet to tell workers the results of the vote at the plant, but that there was widespread abstention

and a feeling among workers that the UAW would not defend them against the threatened plant closure. "They didn't come out and tell us the total. But there was a lot of people who didn't come to vote, who said, 'Why even vote? What difference is it going to make?'"

"It's a new situation for a lot of people. It's different than a strike. The whole atmosphere there is that everybody is scared. A few people had bought houses and don't know what they're going to do. Most people don't have any other form of income. They don't have the confidence to think that they can find something else. And we got a lot of older people there, too. One guy even told me, 'I'm 45, who's going to hire me?'"

Pointing to potentially devastating consequences of the economic uncertainty many will face, he continued, "I'm really concerned about all the people at the plant. Some of the guys, first thing they were doing was going to drink. Those who were in the strikes back in the '90s, a lot of them lost their wives, their livelihoods. You don't know what they're going to do."

"It's like we lost. It's what they've been doing to us, over and over. All these companies use the same lawyers, so if they find one way to screw you, even if it's John Deere over there, it'll eventually spread out and reach you."

In the contract negotiations, Mike said, "our bargaining committee was just there, like it was paid vacation time for them. They were all laid up in the hotel room, ordering room service, putting it on the expense account, and I'm sure they were drinking. They didn't do anything for us. But I'm quite sure the local president from Aurora will get a job with the UAW after the plant closes."

Praising the *Autoworker Newsletter's* coverage of the Caterpillar contract struggle, he said, "I mean it's been dead on. Everybody I send it to, they said, 'Damn, it's what I've been saying all this time.'"

"At Aurora, it's the same thing that you all had in the articles about the other plants. For the UAW, it was 'screw the workers.' The union knew that they were going to get some money. It wasn't anything to our benefit. A buddy of mine who's retired said they didn't do anything for the retirees."

"I don't think the negotiations should be closed, where the workers don't know what's being offered or anything. The UAW does the same thing that Caterpillar does to us. 'Just trust us, you don't need to read anything.' That agreement is a 1,000-page booklet that's not written to be understood. They don't write the contract books in regular English, and that's for a reason."

"The union is not for the best interest of any of the employees. It's a business, like Caterpillar's a business."



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