Letter from a Caterpillar worker in Illinois: “This is class biological warfare”

A reporter
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The World Socialist Web Site *received the following letter from a Caterpillar worker in Illinois. Three years ago, the United Auto Workers imposed a six-year anti-worker contract on Caterpillar workers despite immense opposition. With the slowdown in global mining and commodities markets, Caterpillar laid off tens of thousands of workers and idled and shut down plants globally. The UAW has not lifted a finger to defend workers.*

We want to invite other Caterpillar and other manufacturing workers to write to us about the conditions they face during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The following letter by the Caterpillar worker illustrates the dangerous conditions industrial workers face in their plants, with the union covering for the company. Certain details have been changed to protect the identity of the author.

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I work at a Caterpillar facility in the Peoria area. Despite a number of temporary layoffs in different facilities or departments this week for economic reasons, all others are business as usual.

At my facility at least three employees have been sent home from work with fevers. One in my department is under a “Covid-19 watch” for fourteen days. I assume the others are as well. What this “watch” consists of is unclear. I am certain that it doesn’t involve getting the people tested. The last thing the company wants is an “official” positive result. They would be obliged to do something more than dumping gallons of hand sanitizer, bleach water spray bottles, and Clorox wipes into the plant.

I feel certain the “watch” means precisely what it says. The company will watch them either get better or worse. Even if they’re hospitalized it doesn’t mean they will necessarily be tested, so one hears. And they could very well, heaven forbid, die of complications from pneumonia and no one would know the truth.

Two weeks ago the entire day shift submitted time-off slips for the following week as a protest against being forced to work unnecessarily during this crisis and in the face of the governor’s “shelter at home” rule. I should say that all but our steward filled out slips. He called the union hall instead and told them what was happening. Since it was largely organized by the Team Leads, they would take the brunt of the disciplinary action. Had it been a steward or committeeman the hall said it would have called them and told them to knock it off.

Quite mysteriously, someone called Caterpillar’s Corporate office and told them what was happening, naming the Team Leads as the instigators. They both got off with a severe finger wagging, but my money is on the Union Local as the rat in the sack.

The point, as both the company and the union knew, was that 100 percent of the day shift acted in solidarity to protest the company’s policy and ineffectual attempts at mitigation.

One person under a watch went through the cafeteria, then came out on the shop floor, before deciding to go back home. Management was aware and did nothing. People continued to go through the cafeteria before it closed at its usual time and was cleaned. I should say that the cafeteria is small, with only a few tables available for seating. However, many pass through for coffee or other drinks or snacks on their way out to the shop. It was a major blunder.

The actions or inactions of the government and big business are consistent with their utter, and frequently uttered, contempt for the working class. As I commented to a friend at work, “This is class biological warfare. Though they may not have started it, to the

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ruling class an opportunity is an opportunity. As the British government put it (in their usual deprecating candor), it's a chance to 'cull the herd.'"

Keeping people at work, forcing them back, and re-opening schools is a death sentence for God only knows how many. Has there ever been a time in history where virtually every government on the planet is simultaneously and deliberately intent on murdering through neglect much of their own population while at the same time continuing to plot wars both economically and militarily against each other?

Imperialism has been with us a long time, but I can think of no precedent to this global psychosis.

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