

Letter from a Caterpillar worker to Deere strikers: “Take the reins in your own hands”

Marcus Day
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A veteran Caterpillar worker in Illinois sent the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* the letter below, expressing his support for the 10,000 Deere strikers and recounting the corporate attacks Cat workers have been subjected to over many years.

The UAW’s betrayals of two strikes at Caterpillar in the 1990s—one in 1991-1992 and a second, 17-month-long strike in 1994-1995—were among the most bitter and significant defeats suffered by the working class at the hands of the union bureaucracy in that decade.

In 1991, Caterpillar took the provocative step of refusing to accept the pattern bargaining agreement negotiated at Deere, instead demanding even more aggressive concessions in wages and benefits. Over the next six-and-a-half years, the UAW would sabotage one struggle by Cat workers after another. It refused to call out all its 13,000 members at the company in the first strike, and ignominiously backed down in the face of the company’s threats to hire replacement workers in 1992.

During the 1994-95 strike, the UAW ordered parts workers in Illinois and Tennessee to keep working, and sought to channel workers’ opposition into impotent protest stunts. As the walkout stretched on and the union starved workers on meager strike pay, thousands of workers came to believe that the UAW had led the struggle into a dead end and decided to cross the picket lines and return to work. The UAW’s betrayal of the strike culminated in December 1995, when the union forced workers to again vote on Caterpillar’s insulting offer, with union executives telling workers they would shut down the walkout and end strike pay regardless of how they voted.

As the *International Workers Bulletin* (IWB), one of the predecessors of the *World Socialist Web Site*, wrote in 1995, “UAW officials have attempted to absolve

themselves of blame for what happened by diverting the anger of strikers towards the ‘scabs,’ i.e., those union members who decided to cross picket lines.

“For bureaucrats who never missed a paycheck throughout the entire four years to blame the defeat on the lack of solidarity and resolve on the part of the workers is nothing less than obscene,” the IWB continued. “The appropriate target for the designation ‘scab’ is [UAW President Stephen] Yokich and his fellow bureaucrats in the local leadership and the international, for whom back-stabbing of the membership and collaboration with management is a way of life and source of income.”

It took until 1998, six years after the struggle began, for the union to finally wear down workers’ resistance and force through Caterpillar’s demands for a six-year contract, which included the implementation of the tier system and a 30 percent cut to new hires’ pay. For more on this history, see: *Caterpillar workers reject sellout contract: What is the UAW and whom does it represent?*

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I am a fourth-generation Cat employee. I grew up with a Caterpillar that was “cradle to grave.” That is, you hired in right out of high school, put in your 30 to 35 years and retired at 48 to 53 with a good, secure pension, full health insurance, and time left to live your own life. I was blissfully unaware that all of those things were fought for by labor.

I crossed a picket line 27 years ago when I hired in at Caterpillar. I have never stopped regretting it. I was so naive it pains me to think about it now.

The slap in the face by reality wasn’t long in coming. Before there was a signed contract, much of skilled trades was outsourced. The sole reason I went there, diploma in hand, to be an electrician and possibly into

the engineering side, went up in smoke.

Now it's 27 years later, in my mid-fifties, making in terms of buying power exactly the same, if not less, as I made in 1994. Pensions are gone, a pathetic 401k plan is in its place. 401ks were only ever supposed to supplement our pension, now they are all we have (plus whatever else you choose to hand over to the casino called Wall Street and the banking racket).

Health care premiums rise in advance of inflation, while wages remain stagnant. Job security is non-existent. I expect my facility to close in five years, max. In fact I expect to see its closure as part of the next contract, as the closure of the Aurora plant was in the last one.

This rather long-winded story is intended to be an object lesson to those on the picket line now at John Deere and to those crossing or considering crossing that line. To the strikers, I say stand strong. Stand united. To go back in with less than you demand is not just a loss, it's death. To would-be scabs, you're placing Deere's shackles and chains around your own neck and declaring yourself a willing slave if you cross that line. My reward for doing that has been to have my body broken doing physically brutal work, my home life lived perpetually in fear of financial ruin from outsourcing, plant closures, wage stagnation, insurance gouging, elimination of pensions, profit sharing, and on and on, ad nauseum.

The UAW sold itself out long ago and has aided and abetted all the corporations where it exists in selling us out ever since.

I would say to you brothers and sisters at Deere, you've formed rank-and-file committees to confront the union and they continue to not only defy you, but betray you. Instruct your committees to take over negotiations with the company directly. Break with the union, the International and your locals, and take the reins in your own hands. If the company refuses to meet with you in that fashion, then see to it that not another machine, part, or component leaves your plants till they do.

We working class everywhere have our backs to the wall. There is no more to give short of a life of near destitution, and a short life at that. That's the fate the ruling class would have for us, including you who would cross that picket line... Don't cross it! Join it! Support it if you can in any way you can, because they

are your brothers and sisters. Maybe you don't go in for all this "class" talk. Well I have news for you, if you're a worker you ARE part of the "working class" and its rise or fall is yours, whether you would have it or not.

Strength, Deere brothers and sisters! And to Volvo, Dana, and my own Caterpillar family, it is not too late nor too early to take a stand together. I can't remember who said this, but roughly it went "...if workers were to simply drop their hands and refuse to lift a finger until they got what they wanted, the entire corporate edifice would collapse overnight." We are that strong. Together.

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Deere workers: Take the next step by getting involved with the Deere Rank-and-File Committee. Find out more by emailing deerewrfc@gmail.com or texting (484) 514-9797.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact