

# US Caterpillar-UAW workers authorize strike by more than 98 percent

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*Work at Caterpillar? We want to hear from you: Fill out the form at the end to tell us about your working conditions and what you think workers should be fighting for.*

On Friday, workers at Caterpillar, the world's largest global construction and heavy equipment manufacturer, voted by 98.6 percent to authorize strike action. On March 1, the previous six-year agreement between the United Auto Workers and the company will expire. The contract covers approximately 7,000 UAW members.

After decades of corporate attacks on living standards, and round after round of concessions contracts imposed by the UAW bureaucracy, CAT workers are determined to secure major improvements to wages, benefits and working conditions, not just for themselves but for the next generation.

Four CAT-UAW locals voted last Friday. Local 974 has about 3,600 workers at five plants in the Peoria, Illinois, region, where the company was headquartered until 2017; Local 751 in Decatur, Illinois, has about 2,400 workers; Local 2096 in Pontiac, Illinois, has about 750 workers; and Local 1872 in York, Pennsylvania, has about 300 workers. CAT-UAW also has many thousands of retirees. UAW Local 751 reported the strike authorization vote totals on its Facebook page as follows: Peoria, 98 percent; Decatur, 98.6 percent; Pontiac, 97 percent and York, 98 percent.

An Illinois Caterpillar worker told the WSWs, "A lot of hope we strike. They don't think CAT will offer what we are worth."

Another worker told WSWs, "I voted earlier today. And I feel the mood is kind of like what the [WSWS] article said. A lot of people are ready to fight for what they feel they deserve from CAT and the UAW."

Retirees are particularly hard-hit by cost of living increases. One CAT retiree in Illinois said, "We only

get \$1,200 a month, but we pay \$650 a month for insurance and Caterpillar only pays 20 percent!"

Caterpillar, known for its ruthless cost-cutting and bare-knuckled approach to the workforce, has been preparing for a strike with intense public relations efforts and preparing strikebreakers by training salaried employees in manufacturing positions. The company issued a statement last week announcing its plans to utilize "support, management and contract workers should a work stoppage or strike occur."

CAT workers are demanding not only wage increases to keep pace with inflation but improvements to working conditions. Last June, 39-year-old Steven Dierkes, father of three, fell into a crucible of molten iron at the Mapleton foundry in Illinois, which has been the site of many injuries amid a climate of fear and retaliation against workers reporting safety problems.

A Decatur, Illinois, CAT worker told the WSWs, "Lately, the air quality has been really bad. The exhaust fans have not been running since it got cold out. And there's so much grinding to fix and blend the robot welds to make the frames look good. They give us these hard-bristled brooms to sweep up grinding dust off the floors which is three times harder to sweep! I am so sick of their greed! They want us to put out more than we're capable of."

The heavy equipment giant employs just under 100,000 worldwide in more than 70 countries. A strike in the United States would receive powerful support from their coworkers in other countries, who are fighting against similar conditions.

Last year, Caterpillar workers at the Springvale and Larne plants in Northern Ireland, where cost of living has increased more than 11 percent, were locked in a 14-month contract battle with the company. The company offered an insulting 2.6 percent pay raise with

6.4 percent in the following year and maintained its policy of compulsory overtime. When workers walked out last April, Caterpillar sent over management staff from other UK plants to continue operations.

In spite of an ongoing strike wave in the United Kingdom, the Unite union isolated the CAT workers' struggle, calling out none of its 1.4 million other members in support of the strike and allowing the company to aggressively maneuver against the strike. In July, Caterpillar claimed it was making no progress with Unite and circumvented the union by making a "last, best" offer directly to workers of a 9 percent pay raise and a one-time payment equal to 2.6 percent of wages of the previous year. The union responded by canceling further strike actions and referred later to this contract as "a big win."

Since then, CAT has announced plans to lay off 700 in Northern Ireland in the coming months.

No faith can be placed in the UAW bureaucracy either. The current contract was pushed through in 2017 just before the eruption of the UAW corruption scandal, which revealed union negotiators accepting bribes in exchange for concessions at Fiat Chrysler and embezzling money.

As part of a deal to avoid a government takeover of the union, the UAW agreed to implement direct elections of its top officers for the first time. But the union worked deliberately to suppress the turnout in last year's first round of elections. Will Lehman, a Mack Trucks worker and candidate for UAW president who ran on a socialist platform calling for the abolition of the bureaucracy, documented this vote suppression in a protest sent to the federal monitor.

If the fight is left in their hands, the UAW apparatus will attempt to either prevent a strike by ramming through another sellout, or if that proves impossible, to isolate a strike as much as possible. Last week, the UAW rammed through a contract at agricultural equipment maker CNH, after abandoning 1,100 workers on the picket line for nine months.

The rising tide of class opposition worldwide places CAT workers in a historically powerful position. But workers are locked in a fight not only against CAT management but against the corrupt union bureaucracy. They must prepare now by organizing themselves independently to fight for their own demands, not whatever concessions contract is cooked up behind

closed doors between management and union negotiators.

These demands should include:

- A 50 percent wage increase to make up for years of wage stagnation

- Restoration of COLA to protect against inflation

- Major improvements to health and retirement benefits and working conditions

To fight for this, and to appeal for support and unity with autoworkers and CAT workers around the world, workers should found a rank-and-file strike committee. The WSWs will provide Caterpillar workers every assistance possible in organizing their struggle. Contact us today by filling out the form below.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**