

Caterpillar workers speak out as UAW contract deadline approaches: “How do they expect anybody to live on these wages?”

Marcus Day
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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. Comments will be published anonymously.

With less than two weeks until the March 1 contract expiration between Caterpillar and the United Auto Workers union, workers at the global heavy equipment giant are determined to achieve major improvements in wages and working conditions, both for themselves and the next generation.

Caterpillar employs over 6,000 workers in the UAW at facilities throughout central Illinois, as well as several hundred at a parts distribution center in York, Pennsylvania. Last month, the workers voted by nearly 99 percent to authorize strike action.

Anger has been building for decades among Caterpillar workers. Cat workers were among the first UAW members to be subjected to the divisive wage and benefit tier system. From the late 1990s through the early 2000s, UAW executives agreed to massive and permanent cuts to wages and benefits for new hires, followed by further concessions to the company in six-year contracts in 2011 and 2017, including the closure of the Aurora, Illinois, factory.

Caterpillar workers have taken a critical first step towards taking the fight into their own hands, launching the Caterpillar Workers Rank-and-File Committee last week. In its founding statement, the committee wrote:

The struggle we face is about getting not just what workers want, but what we deserve. We've been losing every contract for decades. The tier system, the loss of pensions and

company-paid health care, wage freezes and stagnation, less time off for leisure and to spend with our families: We have suffered all these injustices and more for far too long.

The committee is calling for a 50 percent wage increase and COLA, to make up for years of falling income, the loss of profit sharing and the impact of inflation. It is also demanding an increase of paid time off, a substantial reduction in health-care premiums and out-of-pocket costs, and the restoration of pensions for all workers.

Workers who spoke to the WSWs earlier this week at plants in the Peoria, Illinois, area—the center of Caterpillar production and operations for much of the 20th century—said that workers needed far better wages, benefits and working conditions.

“All I can say is, with the cost of living going up so high, how do they expect anybody to live on these wages?” a worker with close to 20 years at the company said. “How do they expect people to put food on their table?” Asked if they felt the UAW bureaucracy had fought for workers during the past two decades, the worker replied simply, “No.”

Another East Peoria worker with a few years experience said that among the biggest issues they faced was “the way management, shall we say unnecessarily pushes, you know what I mean?”

The worker said inadequate training was a problem, sometimes just a few days on complex jobs. “With the tractors that we do, it's just a very large amount of options. It takes quite a bit of training.”

In 2022, 39-year-old Steven Dierkes died horrifically,

falling into a vat filled with molten metal at Caterpillar's Mapleton foundry, after having been on the job less than 10 days. The US Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) found, following an investigation, that Caterpillar willfully ignored basic safety measures that could have prevented his death.

The worker in East Peoria continued, "Our pay grade right now is around \$22.75 topped out. And I think that there's other places that do generally basically the same assembly and they're like \$25 or \$26 an hour. So it's one of the things that should be shot for, better wages. I mean, we work for one of the giants in the manufacturing industry.

Referring to the billions in stock buybacks and dividends, he said, "They got it to give to us and why don't they? Well, we know why they don't. We still need money. You've got to feed yourself, do something every day, you know?"

Another veteran worker in East Peoria noted that many workers were hired in as "supplementals," a contingent and precarious status. The UAW apparatus has allowed various forms of highly exploited "supplemental" and "temporary" positions to become widespread throughout the auto industry, with the workers paying union dues but told they essentially have no rights or job protections.

"You come in as supplemental, you have up to two years before you actually can get converted over to full time," the worker said.

"I know a couple people that got hired in this full time because they had prior machine experience, but a lot of the people that come in with no machine experience have to start as supplementals. They can hold you as supplemental status for two years."

Describing the long-term decline in Cat workers' living standards, he continued, "When I was growing up, it was almost like a joke. Like, 'Oh, that person has a nice car. They must work at Caterpillar,' or, 'That person lives out in the suburbs, or has a nice house, they work at Cat.' You know, it's not really that anymore.

"The way stuff is going now, if you just have one person working at Cat, if something's broke, you got to put it on a list and prioritize whether fixing the car is more important than paying the rent, or paying the mortgage, or buying food for the week."

Current and retired Cat workers elsewhere have also

written to the WSWS in recent days to voice their determination to win major advances and finally reverse years of concessions.

"It's time we make a stand and get what we deserve!" a worker in Decatur said. "Please help us at the Decatur facility get the BEST contract possible!"

Another worker in Decatur wrote, "Conditions at my facility are not great and slowly eroding. From the tools we use to the bathrooms, everything is slowly moving to a state of disrepair that Caterpillar doesn't seem to care about.

"I'm sick of quarterly emails and meetings by polo shirts I've never met or heard of telling me about how good things are ABOUT TO be. Or [the CEO's] emails bragging about the billions we made over the course of the year and how we've either increased or sustained dividends for stockholders, while simultaneously telling employees that do the actual work that we can't afford tools or processes that would make this work easier physically and safer. I'm over the gaslighting."

"Caterpillar is very greedy to their workers," a Cat retiree in the Peoria area said. The worker also warned his fellow workers about the corruption of top UAW executives, noting how some "went to prison." Norwood Jewell, one of more than a dozen top union officials sentenced on bribery and corruption charges in the past several years, was the UAW vice president who oversaw the 2017 Caterpillar contract negotiations. He later pleaded guilty to accepting bribes from Fiat Chrysler and served a brief term in a white-collar penitentiary.

"The union and company needs to be made to give retired workers back pay on the medical insurance," the retiree continued. "We retired not paying a cent, now we pay out 70 percent of our retirement money for 20 percent coverage."



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