

Opposition builds among Caterpillar workers with UAW contract deadline one week away

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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.

As the contract expiration for over 6,000 Caterpillar (Cat) workers in the United Auto Workers union approaches on March 1, workers continue to speak out on their demands for better working conditions, safety and a higher standard of living after decades of concessions imposed on them by the UAW bureaucracy, including the loss of pensions, higher health care costs and wage freezes.

Caterpillar workers in the UAW in East Peoria, Decatur and other parts of central Illinois, as well as in York, Pennsylvania, are gearing up for a major struggle against the transnational heavy-equipment manufacturing company, which employs over 100,000 in facilities across Asia, Europe, and North and South America.

Workers in both the UAW plants and other Caterpillar factories have confronted a ruthless assault on their living standards. Following bitter strikes in the 1980s and 1990s, Caterpillar imposed massive concessions, facilitated by the betrayals carried out by the UAW and other union bureaucracies.

In the 2005 contract, Caterpillar imposed a two-tier wage and benefit system, following in the footsteps of John Deere, which slashed pay and benefits for new hires in the late 1990s. Since the 2005 contract, wages have been frozen for the top tier Cat workers, while second tier workers have had inadequate wage increases below the rate of inflation for more than a decade. The 2017 contract included further concessions to the company, including giving it a green light to close its Aurora, Illinois, plant by 2019.

A veteran Cat worker out of the Peoria area spoke out

against the concessions by the UAW national leadership along with UAW Local 974. “This is my fourth contract,” she said. “I have heard the union say in the previous three contracts that this is the best that they can get us so we might as well vote ‘Yes.’ The UAW International and Local 974 sold out the members a long time ago!”

This time around, workers are determined to fight back and take matters into their own hands, launching the Caterpillar Workers Rank-and-File Committee. The committee is demanding a 50 percent pay increase to make up for lost income over the last two decades, cost-of-living raises to keep up with the skyrocketing inflation of the last two years, the ending of the two-tier system, vastly improved health care plans, the restoration of pensions, safe working conditions and more.

The committee wrote in its founding statement, “We made loud and clear with our 98.6 percent strike authorization vote last month: The time when Cat management can treat us like slaves is over.”

Another Caterpillar worker from the Peoria area spoke out against the sweatshop conditions he faces, telling the *World Socialist Web Site*, “Caterpillar is one stressful place to work. They deploy intimidation and scare tactics to the people that are making them RECORD PROFITS. They act like second graders in their hate for union members. The company makes their hard workers feel like the enemy.

“I personally hate Caterpillar, but I still come in every day and do a good job for them. Sickening that the CEO of Cat makes millions every year while there are people in here making \$15 an hour. Minimum wage working for a Fortune 100 company.”

Caterpillar posted over \$6.7 billion in profits for 2022 from \$59 billion in sales and revenue, and handed out

\$6.7 billion to investors via share buybacks and dividends.

A Caterpillar worker in Decatur, Illinois denounced the conditions workers face. “Over the last year or so, the place has gone into disrepair. The tools are in bad shape. Our facilities are in bad shape. Our relationship with managers is deteriorating. It’s sliding down the hill all around.

“The morale is not great, especially on the line that I work. The message from Caterpillar is quality first, velocity second. Their actions are the opposite of that. When there are legitimate quality concerns, supervisors look to cut corners to keep units moving down the line. It’s so frustrating to me. It makes everyone’s jobs harder on the line. When we push the quality issues on the front end it means it has to get fixed on the back end.”

He added that workers were being kept in the dark by UAW officials about the state of the contract negotiations. “We get these texts from the UAW. What are they talking about? Can we know any part of the negotiations? Especially when our union presidents keep going to jail,” he said, referring to former UAW presidents Dennis Williams and Gary Jones, who served prison time for embezzling dues money from workers. Norwood Jewell, the lead negotiator for the 2017 Caterpillar-UAW contract, also pled guilty and briefly went to jail for accepting bribes from Fiat-Chrysler. Current UAW President Ray Curry was part of the same UAW-Caterpillar negotiating team with Jewell.

A former Cat worker, who now works for a parts supplier for the company, spoke out on the unsafe conditions they had faced as well. At Caterpillar’s Mapleton Foundry, two workers died within the space of just six months, including the horrific incineration of 39-year-old Steven Dierkes.

The former worker noted, “I will say safety was a big issue on my line alone. We had a platform that had come unwelded and it was put into work order in March of 2022 and it still had not been fixed when I was let go. We had a leak on the floor above which caused water to come down on sand molds and on electrical outlets.

“In my personal opinion, management is horrible. Safety conditions need to be improved.” He continued, “I know during summer it’s so hot in the foundry you

can almost pass out from the heat.” Management’s response, he said, “is to pass out ice pops.”

The worker also said greater flexibility needed to be provided for workers who are late, particularly when it’s related to medical treatment or child care. “After all, we are human and they don’t see it that way. I would have loved to have stayed and continued to work for the company.”

The worker added that there is a growing sentiment for higher wages. “I would definitely also say a big pay raise is very much talked about among everyone working there. When I was there for six months my line produced \$700 million for the company and we were being paid \$23.60 an hour. I see that as being underpaid when one line can produce that amount of money working six days a week non-stop, and you’re criticized when you turn down a day of overtime.”

He concluded, “I do agree with all Cat employees, wages need to be increased, better benefits, safer work conditions. You’re expected to work till you drop, and you lose your family’s time and memories you’ll never get back, just to barely make ends meet with the wages, and then be expected to be grateful for this company to have hired you, while they make millions and only pay out thousands.”

White collar workers at Caterpillar have also written to the WSWS to express their opposition to the company and solidarity with workers on the factory floors. One office worker said, “I’ve always felt that I have more in common with the workers on the shop floors than I ever have with the management telling me to take their places. I want to support them on getting the best contract possible. I would rather be on the picket line myself than be used as leverage against them.”



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