

Caterpillar workers have a right to know what's being said in the contract talks!

Prepare to launch a counteroffensive of Cat workers and autoworkers!

Caterpillar Workers Rank-and-File Committee
27 February 2023

The following statement was issued by the recently formed Caterpillar Workers Rank-and-File Committee. The contract covering nearly 7,000 Caterpillar workers in the United Auto Workers union expires on March 1. To contact or discuss joining the Caterpillar Workers Rank-and-File Committee, email cat.wrffc@gmail.com, or fill out the form at the end of the statement.

With only hours remaining until the March 1 contract expiration between Caterpillar and the United Auto Workers union, workers are being kept in the dark over what is really being discussed between management and UAW officials.

The UAW “negotiating” team has issued vague, worthless “updates” in recent weeks that have told us nothing about what is being discussed behind our backs. They must think workers are fools, imploring us to “have faith” after decades of selling us out again and again. They have clearly coordinated their communications with management, using virtually the same language Caterpillar has issued.

The most recent update, however, must be taken as a warning. The UAW bargaining team writes that they have made “positive progress on the needs of membership” while acknowledging that they have not even discussed “economics.” At the same time, they say they are “working on the logistics of the vote if we come to a tentative agreement.”

This is a recipe for another sellout. Closed-door, backroom talks between management and UAW officials will only produce the same result as each time before: a contract which would boost Cat’s profits and utterly fail to meet what workers need and deserve. The corrupt UAW bureaucracy has already made abundantly clear that the “needs of the membership” are the furthest things from their minds, having forced on us wage cuts and freezes, the elimination of pensions and COLA, the claw-back of benefits, the tier system, the shutdown of factories and more.

There is no legitimate reason why rank-and-file workers have been kept in the dark on what’s being discussed for months. Management knows, the UAW heads know—the workers are the ones being excluded from the discussions on the contract.

The only plausible explanation is that the UAW apparatus is trying to put us on the back foot before once again springing on us a contract based on the demands of management, as they did in 2017, 2011, 2005 and before.

The corrupt UAW bureaucracy long ago abandoned the principle of “no contract, no work.” It is possible it will announce a “last-minute,” 12:01 a.m. extension of the previous contract. But any extension will only benefit the company, not the workers. It would allow them to stockpile even more equipment and further prepare their strikebreaking plans.

Nothing has ever been won without the most determined struggle against the corporate bosses. But we cannot leave this battle in the hands of the union bureaucracy. If there is to be a real, effective fight for the needs of all workers, then we must organize it ourselves.

The Caterpillar Workers Rank-and-File Committee advances the following measures as necessary to prevail in our struggle on the strongest possible basis:

- **Workers should begin immediately making preparations for strike action.** We have already made loud and clear that we are ready to act and fight for what we need with our 98.6 percent strike authorization vote last month.

We appeal to all sections of Caterpillar workers to join and support our fight, including Cat workers at USW or non-union plants; rank-and-file white collar workers; workers at Caterpillar’s parts suppliers; and Cat workers in other countries. We must build solidarity to stand up to Caterpillar management and act as a whole body, instead of being divided against each other.

Our committee has already received statements of support from office workers, who Cat is hoping to throw onto the shop floor and use against us. We welcome the expressions of solidarity from white collar workers, and we will not accept any attempt by the company to retaliate against workers who refuse to cross the picket line in support of a strike.

- **Rank-and-file workers must have real oversight and control over all contract negotiations.** No more closed-door “negotiations” between Cat and UAW executives! All bargaining must be livestreamed and conducted in the open, so that all members can watch and participate. Workers have a right to this information.

- **Workers must be given their full income from the UAW’s more than \$800 million strike fund for the duration of any walkout.** The recent increase in strike pay to \$500 a week remains completely insufficient. The efforts of UAW President Ray Curry and other highly-paid officials to make this increase seem like a generous gift only further demonstrates how out of touch they are with the day-to-day needs of the rank and file.

- **There must be full disclosure of all the terms of any proposed contract**—not just phony “highlights”—and at least two weeks for the rank and file to review it before voting, or it’s an automatic “no” vote. There must be no return to work until we have seen and ratified the full proposal.

We will not accept an agreement which does not meet the basic needs of workers. The Caterpillar Rank-and-File Committee puts forth the following demands as necessary to provide workers a decent standard of living and secure retirement:

- **A 50 percent wage increase for all workers**, to make up for years of frozen or falling wages and the loss of profit-sharing. If wages had kept up with inflation over the past 30–40 years, let alone the substantial increases in productivity, workers would be making \$40–50 an hour.

- **COLA (regular cost-of-living raises)** in order to keep up with surging food, gas and housing prices.

- **The immediate abolition of the wage and benefit tier system**, with post-2005 pay and benefit cuts reversed.

- **A substantial increase in paid sick and vacation time off for all workers.**

- **A massive reduction in health care premiums and out-of-pocket costs** for both current workers and retirees.

- **The restoration of pensions** for all workers and their payment at a level adequate to provide a decent retirement.

No layoffs or plant closures!

Caterpillar workers are not just fighting for our own interests. What’s at stake are the interests of workers throughout the auto, heavy equipment and broader manufacturing industries.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, John Deere, Caterpillar and CNH, with the assistance of the UAW bureaucracy, used us as the testing ground for the implementation of the wage and benefit tier system, drastically and permanently reducing the pay and benefits for new hires, while also strangling the living standards of veteran workers. The tier system here was subsequently expanded throughout the auto industry from 2007–2009.

Management at the construction and farm equipment companies and the auto industry is intimately connected. Gerald Johnson, executive vice president at General Motors, sits on Cat’s board of directors, while John Deere CEO John May was recently brought onto Ford’s board.

Any concessions which Caterpillar and the UAW are able to extract from us would thus be used as a precedent and battering ram against autoworkers at the Big Three companies. Conversely, a decisive victory by workers at Cat would enormously encourage workers elsewhere. It would quickly accelerate the working class rebellion against inflation and degrading conditions, a rebellion which is already underway.

Fellow workers: our time has come. We are entering into a serious battle, but one which holds the possibility of finally reversing the decades of attacks on workers and winning real improvements to our living standards. Caterpillar has made clear that it has more than enough money—all of it produced from our labor—showering investors with billions in stock buybacks and dividends.

But to win this fight, we must be organized and mobilize the collective strength of the working class. We call on workers throughout Caterpillar and the auto industry to contact our committee and undertake a counteroffensive to secure the rights and interests of workers.

To contact or discuss joining the Caterpillar Workers Rank-and-File Committee, email cat.wrfc@gmail.com, or fill out the form below:



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wsws.org/contact