

UAW announces tentative agreement with Caterpillar shortly after midnight, defying calls by workers for strike action

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 what you think about the TA announcement and what you think workers should be fighting for. Comments will be published anonymously.

This is a developing story. Check back for updates.

Shortly after a midnight contract expiration deadline Tuesday, the United Auto Workers union announced a tentative agreement with Caterpillar, the global construction and heavy equipment giant.

In a brief message which workers shared with the *World Socialist Web Site*, the UAW wrote, “Tonight 28-Feb-2023, we were successful in reaching a Tentative Agreement for our Membership to vote on. Please continue to work as scheduled. Contract Highlights, ratification meetings, voting locations and polling times will be communicated as soon as possible.”

Workers who spoke to the WSWs responded with immediate anger and suspicion to the announcement. A worker in Decatur, Illinois, said, “The people I’m in a group text with are pissed. We feel like the union just f*****d us.”

There can be no doubt that the tentative agreement, hammered out behind the backs of the rank and file, will utterly fail to meet workers’ calls for major improvements to wages, benefits and working conditions. Workers should organize immediately to demand the release of the full contract terms, not just the UAW bureaucracy’s self-serving “highlights,” and at least two weeks to study the agreement.

Frustration and sentiment for strike action had been building quickly among thousands of Caterpillar workers Tuesday night as the midnight contract

expiration approached.

Workers were particularly losing patience with the virtual information blackout imposed by the UAW apparatus in the run-up to the deadline. In a terse, nine-sentence update released earlier Tuesday, the UAW national bargaining team wrote: “At this time, it looks like we will be going into the night and very well up to the deadline (12:00 am March 1, 2023).”

The bulk of the statement, with evident nervousness, was devoted to an attempt at tamping down militancy and thinly veiled threats against possible wildcat action: “Things we are hearing from across the table is that some of our members are going to walk at midnight no matter what. Do not do that. This will put you in a bad situation no matter what the outcome of the negotiations are.”

The union bureaucracy warned against workers taking action even as it admitted that Caterpillar might immediately begin taking action of its own. “You may see the Company begin to roll out their contingency plans. Don’t be alarmed or show any reaction, this is part of the process.”

The statement later said, “If you don’t hear anything, please continue your work as any other night.”

Among workers, the mood was defiant. “Ready to walk!” another worker in Decatur, Illinois, wrote the WSWs earlier Tuesday. “Tired of being treated poorly, air in here is full of grinding dust. Need more money! 50 percent raise! Our bonuses on this line are ridiculous! We do damn good work and still treated like a peasant!”

The first Decatur worker said about the UAW’s afternoon update, “Again, it’s vague and worthless. ‘Just work like normal, even if you’re there after

midnight, which is when the contract ends' doesn't do it for me. We're mad."

A worker at a plant in East Peoria said, "Everybody here is ready to go out. A lot of people feel like the union is just going to give an extension but we'll see."

On Monday, the Caterpillar Workers Rank-and-File Committee issued a statement calling for an end to the secrecy shrouding the contract talks between the UAW and management, and for workers to prepare to launch a common offensive throughout Caterpillar and the heavy equipment and auto industries.

The statement said:

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.

The rank-and-file committee has called for demands needed "to provide workers a decent standard of living and secure retirement," including a 50 percent wage increase, the restoration of COLA raises to combat inflation, the abolition of the tier system, a massive reduction of health care costs and the restoration of pensions.

The committee also appealed directly to other sections of workers for support, including white-collar and non-union Caterpillar workers, parts supplier workers, autoworkers and Caterpillar workers in other countries.

The growing sentiment among Caterpillar workers for a fight to reverse decades of concessions takes place within a major upsurge of the class struggle internationally. Millions of workers in France have protested against proposed pension cuts in recent weeks, and hundreds of thousands of workers in the United Kingdom have walked out repeatedly against

threatened anti-strike legislation. At Caterpillar's Grenoble and Échirolles plants in France, the unions were forced to call a strike last month in the face of widespread anger among workers over insulting 2.5 percent wage increases, which, combined with surging inflation, would result in a major cut in real income.

The Caterpillar contract expiration deadline has also coincided with a developing crisis within the UAW apparatus, which was concluding voting in the runoff for its first-ever direct elections for national officers Tuesday. Less than 13 percent of workers voted in the second round of voting, according to ballot totals reported by the court-appointed UAW Monitor. The UAW elections in recent months had been characterized by widespread disenfranchisement and suppression of voter turnout by the union bureaucracy, as documented in a protest filed by Will Lehman, a Mack Trucks worker who won nearly 5,000 votes for his campaign for UAW president in the first round last year.



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