

Anger erupts among Caterpillar workers as details of UAW agreement emerge: “We deserve way better”

Marcus Day
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Work at Caterpillar? Tell us what you think about the tentative agreement and what workers should be fighting for! Comments will be published anonymously.

On Wednesday, indignation and disbelief were spreading quickly among thousands of Caterpillar workers in the US, following the announcement of a tentative agreement the previous night between the United Auto Workers (UAW) union and the company.

The announcement of a “last-minute” deal came in the face of growing calls among workers for strike action and desperate pleas by UAW officials for workers to remain on the line as the midnight deadline approached. In January, Cat workers voted by nearly 99 percent to authorize a strike, expressing their determination to reverse years of eroding living standards and concessions.

UAW locals began to release limited “highlights” touting the contract proposal on Wednesday, as did management, and votes are reportedly scheduled for this weekend. However, many workers reported that union officials were maintaining a tight-lipped policy on the full terms of the agreement.

“No mention of the new contract by any official source at work today, Cat or union,” a worker in Decatur told the WSWS. “Nobody that I’ve talked to likes the contract,” he added.

Another worker in Decatur wrote the WSWS and said, “We were given strike shirts that say ‘will strike if provoked.’ Well this terrible tentative agreement is provoking us all. We are ready and we want to strike. We deserve way better than what they want to give.”

On Wednesday, the Caterpillar Workers Rank-and-File Committee released a statement denouncing the agreement as a sellout and calling for its rejection.

The committee wrote:

What is already known about the terms of the UAW-Caterpillar deal indicates that it is another slap in the face and deserving of an overwhelming rejection.

According to the UAW’s “highlights,” the six-year contract proposal would contain wage increases totaling just 19 percent, an average of just over 3 percent a year. The wage increases would be distributed as follows: 7 percent at ratification and 4 percent raises for three other years, with only lump sum payments in the other years, which do not increase base wages.

After noting that the cost of health care premiums were set to rise 2 percent annually over the six years of the contract, the committee continued: “Annual inflation in January was 6.4 percent, and at times last year it was above 9 percent. In other words, the biggest yearly wage increase of 7 percent would not even cover the cost of rising food, energy and health care prices!”

A worker at the parts distribution center in York, Pennsylvania, (the only UAW-covered facility remaining outside Illinois) told the WSWS that the wage increases in the deal would be undermined given “the loss in bonuses. I’d like to have the health care covered, pension and profit sharing. I’m voting ‘no’ on the first proposal.”

“It’s not a good situation here. With the contract or on the job,” another worker stated who asked that he not be identified. “The company will come down on

me,” he explained.

“They didn’t tell us anything” about the contract, he stated. “It was worked out behind closed doors.” He said the amount from the sign-on bonus wasn’t even communicated to the workers.

“They work us like slaves,” he said. The company forces mandatory overtime on workers “constantly,” with shifts averaging 10 hours a day as well as additional work on Saturdays. When asked about their pay, he said that with inflation, he makes less overall than he did six years ago.

A third Decatur worker said he was tired of Caterpillar effectively “being in control of what medications my doctor can prescribe to me and my wife. If my doctor prescribes it, I shouldn’t have to use a GoodRX card [a retail coupon card] to get it. It should be covered.

He continued, “We need to show them that we are *not* just an employee ID number! That we are the people, the *human beings* behind their products!

“Unfortunately, it’s not just the corporations doing it. It’s the union allowing it to happen with bad deals,” he said. “These union officials we have are crooked.”

“I agree wholeheartedly with this,” he concluded, expressing his agreement with the Caterpillar Rank-and-File Committee. “We have to stand and fight.”

Workers also took to social media to express their opposition to the deal, despite the efforts of the local union apparatuses to limit comments. In Decatur, workers overwhelmingly denounced the agreement on the Local 751’s post announcing the tentative agreement. “Automatic NO from me. There is no way that whatever is in there is the best CAT can do...” the most-liked comment stated.

Many workers expressed particular contempt at the effort to lure them with a sign-on bonus. “Not tricking me with that sign on bonus garbage big NO FOR ME,” one said. “Forget that sign-on bonus—think of future,” wrote another.

In an indication of the explosive mood at the Decatur plant, a post by the local announcing that the hall would close early for the day provoked a furious condemnation from a worker.

“The hall will close at 3pm today,” Local 751 wrote. “The internet has been down and we cannot take in any dues payments at this time. Sorry.”

In a comment which received numerous reactions in

agreement, a worker replied, “Worried about [their] money!! What about us? Give us what we are due.”



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