

“This is a fight for working class people globally”: Caterpillar workers rank-and-file committee holds powerful meeting against sellout agreement

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10 March 2023

Work at Caterpillar? We want to hear from you: Fill out the form at the end to tell us what you think about the Tentative Agreement (TA) announcement and what you think workers should be fighting for. Comments will be published anonymously. Text CAT to (866) 847-1086 to sign up for updates from the Caterpillar Workers Rank-and-File Committee or discuss joining.

On Wednesday, the Caterpillar Workers Rank-and-File Committee and the World Socialist Web Site co-hosted a well-attended and powerful meeting calling on Caterpillar workers to vote “no” on the UAW-Caterpillar sellout agreement and to prepare for a strike.

The meeting brought together critical sections of workers in rank-and-file committees at Caterpillar, GM Flint Assembly, and Dana auto parts along with socialist UAW presidential candidate and second-tier Mack Trucks worker Will Lehman.

WSWS Labor Editor Jerry White moderated the discussion and said, “This is a very important meeting. The Caterpillar workers fight is the first of many industrial struggles in the US this year, and part of a growing international movement of the working class.” WSWS writer Marcus Day also gave a concise report on what’s at stake at the struggle in Caterpillar, reviewing the historical and strategic issues involved.

“This is not just a fight for us here at Caterpillar. This is also a fight for working class people globally”

A delegation of workers from the Caterpillar Workers Rank-and-File Committee gave opening remarks on what they were fighting for and why they opposed the tentative agreement the United Auto Workers is backing. The six-year deal would result in a massive wage cut with inflation factored in and the rising cost of health care premiums.

John, a worker at the Decatur, Illinois, plant, appealed powerfully for Caterpillar workers to take a stand as part of the global struggles of the working class emerging today.

“My fellow brothers and sisters,” John said, “in this economic justice struggle we are in right now, as working class people, we are in the best position we have ever been in 40 years, to be able to make gains for economic stability, and justice. So in order for us to do that, we have to be able to stick together and continue speaking the truth and the facts, and just keep pushing and pushing.

“This is not just a fight for us here at Caterpillar. This is also a fight for working class people globally. In order for us to break the yoke of these

corporations off of our backs, to make gains. It will prove to others and be an inspiration to others, knowing that they can do the same, just as we are doing right now working to make these changes for all people—not just for us here at Caterpillar.”

John went on to speak out against the tentative agreement brought back by the UAW apparatus. “We know we can get better,” he said. “If we didn’t know that, we wouldn’t be here right now doing what we’re doing. And I feel like a lot of employees have just been beat down so much by the corporate system. Over the years, they’ve got peanuts handed to them.”

Speaking on the surging cost of living crisis, John added, “It does not equate to the amount of inflation we’re dealing with nationally and globally right now. It does not equate to the injustices that have been brought upon us by these corporations when it comes to our labor.

“They’re continuing to exploit our work ethic and our labor and using the sweat off of our backs to make their profits and to not give us anything in return. I think it’s really important that everybody understands that Caterpillar had \$4.19 billion in stock buybacks this last year alone. That speaks volumes.

“They know they can buy back their own stocks and continue to get returned investments on that money consistently making them richer than rich. While we sit here and beg and plead for peanuts, and it’s got to stop. It has to.”

The tentative agreement is “a slap in the face”

Derek, another worker from Decatur, spoke out against the tentative agreement as well. “I’ve gone to the informational meetings about our tentative agreement and it’s pathetic.” The contract the UAW accepted, he said, “is a slap in the face.”

Derek continued, “If you devote any amount of time looking at either the highlights that they give you, or previous contracts or anything, you know, this is just not acceptable. None of the math checks out. One of the things I recently learned was that in order for employees to get this \$6,000 ratification bonus that management at Caterpillar and the UAW have touted so much, is that it has to pass on the first vote unanimously amongst all of the facilities. Which means if all the plants vote ‘yes’ except one then the \$6,000 is off the table.

“I think that’s so sneaky! I hate it. Everything is just unsatisfactory. The wages that they give you in the highlights include raises that they gave us

last year, which I think is dishonest. Seven percent upfront isn't enough. Four percent isn't enough [for base wages] and lump sum payments, two years in lieu of raises isn't enough. It's just unacceptable. It seems like they're so proud of adding in things that they took away from previous contracts.

"It's infuriating to hear the union, the people that are supposed to represent me, as a worker, come to me and tell me that this is the best that they can do. It's just ridiculous to me. I go to the union meetings and they won't give us a copy of the full contract to take home. They say we don't need it. They say that anything that's changed is in the highlights. And if it's not in the highlights, it hasn't changed.

"But how can we make a decision if we don't have access to all the information? That just seems so dishonest to me? And it's hard to believe that the organization that's supposed to stand up for me as a worker would do something like this? I know I'm definitely voting 'no.' And I would encourage everybody who's listening to do two things: show up and vote 'no.' I believe that having all of the information is critical. And having all the information and looking at it in good faith would lead you to the conclusion that this contract is unsatisfactory and that you should vote it down."

The reason UAW bureaucrats were not giving workers the full contract was because they are afraid if workers scrutinize it closely, they would reject it overwhelmingly. Following the refusal of union officials to release the contract this week, the committee put out a statement demanding that the full contract be released for workers to carefully study.

John continued, "The Caterpillar workers rank-and-file committee right here is the only voice that that has stood up, to give us a platform in order to be able to speak our grievances and discuss these issues with each other."

He appealed to everyone on the meeting to join the committee, part of the growing International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. "Spread the word amongst your co-workers, amongst your friends. Explain to them the importance of this committee. It doesn't matter about your religion, your race, your political views. This is about economic justice, in a world where the disparity of the workers compared to those of the 1 and 5 percent is out of control and is ridiculous.

"We cannot do this without being a part of this committee without being a part of this committee, to allow us to have those voices, to get our voices out there, to get our word out there in order to be able to share with others how we're feeling and what we need to do in order to make gains for ourselves economically."

"Building a rank-and-file committee at Caterpillar ... is immensely important"

Workers at the GM Flint Assembly Rank-and-File Committee joined the meeting to speak in support of the fight by Caterpillars. One GM worker said, "We fully support the decision by Caterpillar workers for the demand that the full contract be released." The worker went on to detail the sellouts by the UAW apparatus at GM Subsystems, wholly-owned subsidiary of GM, where the UAW agreed to substandard wages and benefits for the material handling workers. "The UAW did this with GM 'behind closed doors' without the decision of workers. It's completely unacceptable and the only solution is to have these rank-and-file committees to build support and defend workers and ensure that they can have a say in these contracts."

Will Lehman spoke in support of the Caterpillar workers as well, noting, "I've been sold out before, just like you guys. I've seen other betrayals at other plants, and that led me to campaign for the UAW International

presidency, to abolish the bureaucracy of the UAW and have workers have power directly in their hands in rank-and-file committees.

"I think it's extremely important you're undertaking of building a rank-and-file committee at Caterpillar, the largest construction equipment manufacturer in the world. It's also monumental that Dana workers and GM Flint workers have built a rank-and-file committee. It's immensely important work, and I appreciate everyone that's taking part of it."

Will went on to point to the political significance of these committees and the need to unite with workers internationally.

"Caterpillar workers are in an incredibly powerful position."

WSWS writer Marcus Day then gave an overview of the central issues in the struggle of Caterpillar workers.

"I think what emerges out of it is that there's a growing recognition within the working class that things are completely the opposite of the way they need to be," Marcus said. Workers sense that there has to be a fundamental change, he said, because they are more and more unable to pay their bills and working conditions are becoming intolerable.

"*The World Socialist Web Site* strongly endorses the call of the Caterpillar Workers Rank-and-File Committee, first, for the full contract to be released. And, second, based on the information that's already available just from the two to three pages of highlights that the UAW has released, that this sellout agreement be overwhelmingly rejected. This agreement would entail a massive attack on workers' real wages."

Day went on to point out the fact that the 19 percent increase over six years amounts to a 3 percent increase per year, far below the current rate of inflation, above 6.4 percent. He said it would not cover the rising cost of food, energy, housing or other basic necessities. In effect, this would be a 25 percent wage cut for the duration of the contract.

Health care premiums would also increase by as much as 2 percent each year, he added, raising out-of-pocket costs for a family plan to between \$550 and \$675 a month. Retirees, he added, "who are on very limited fixed incomes, and in no position to absorb any increase in health care costs," would see their premiums go up by 1.8 percent annually.

Importantly, he noted, "A historical comparison would be revealing here. In the early 1990s, average wages of Caterpillar were around \$17 an hour. With inflation taken into account, that's essentially \$37 in today's money. This means there has been a gigantic step backwards for workers."

The massive profits by Caterpillar, Day added, showed that the company had more than enough to provide workers with the demands by rank-and-file Caterpillar workers. Caterpillar made \$7.9 billion in profits in 2022, he noted, adding that was a 15 percent increase from the year before. Additionally, over \$6.7 billion were given to shareholders and major investors in the form of stock buybacks and dividends.

Day pointed to the fact this struggle at Caterpillar was part of a global process with mass strikes and protests over the last several days in Greece, France and Sri Lanka. These struggles, he said, were being driven by the demands of the ruling classes that workers pay for the global inflationary crisis and the massive costs of the military confrontation with Russia and China.

He concluded by pointing out that "Caterpillar workers are in an incredibly powerful position. You have the means to communicate like never before with social media, the internet. Workers all over the world are looking to fight back against the company, which, as you well know, is struggling with hiring and turnover." With over 100,000 Caterpillar workers internationally, workers in the US have powerful allies in their struggle.

“If there’s going to be a real fight,” he said, “workers themselves are going to have to organize it. It’s not going to come from the UAW bureaucracy. It’s not going to come from anywhere else. It has to be the workers themselves taking matters into their own hands.” He appealed to Caterpillar workers to join the committee and link up with other sections of the working class.

“We’re right here supporting you guys”

Following the report by Marcus Day, several wrongfully fired auto parts workers from Dana Inc.’s Toledo Driveline plant spoke powerfully to offer their support for Caterpillar workers and to share their experiences.

One worker said, “I wanted to give support to you Caterpillar workers out there. We just started our Dana Workers Rank-and-File committee last week. We were wrongfully terminated.” She said the committee consisted of workers from all generations from their early twenties to their fifties.

“What’s happening in our plant is that anybody,” she said, “whether they are a minute late, whether they get a write-up, whether you report something or you speak out, they’re getting fired on the spot and people are losing their salaries. One day they show up to work, and then the next day, they are no longer employed.”

Dana workers, she said, have to work seven days a week. “There is no chance to grieve if a family member dies of COVID. There is no time to rest to get your mindset in order.” The 12-hour days and no time off, she said, were producing a mental health crisis in the plant. “Sometimes you see people on the floor who will break down crying.” “The company,” she added, “was banking on the health care crisis,” because “they know this will cause yelling and tensions, and then they fire workers for that.” Instead of defending workers, she said, “the UAW are informants, helping the company oppress us.”

She said the committee was demanding the reinstatement of all workers who were fired in violation of the contract’s “progressive discipline” policy or misrepresentation from the UAW. “We should be coming to work to bring home a livelihood, not to be instilled with fear, thinking is this going to be my last day at work?”

In order to fight back, she added, workers had to “speak up and speak out” and “expose your stories.” They had to fight for their rights and build a new leadership. She said, the younger generation was prepared to join the fight and could use all forms of social media to spread information and unite workers in different factories and work locations. “I would like to give all my support to the Caterpillar workers, the GM workers. We’re right here supporting you guys. We have our own struggles here in Toledo. We’re about to give Dana hell.”

In summing up the meeting, White drew upon critical historical lessons that Caterpillar workers must learn from. He spoke about the 1934 general strike in Toledo and the battles of Caterpillar workers from the 1940s to the early 1990s. In 1992, he said, Caterpillar workers struck for five-and-a-half months.

“The UAW called off the strike when Caterpillar announced it was going to be bringing in scabs and completely surrendered.” In the face of the globalization of capitalist production, he said, the unions, which are based on national programs, abandoned any resistance and instead helped the companies slash wages in the name of international competitiveness.

Today, White noted, after decades of suppression of the class struggle by the unions, a global movement of the working class was reemerging. “While globalization was initially used against the working class, it also created a powerful, globally integrated working class. Caterpillar workers went out on strike in France in January. In Greece today, thousands of workers went out on strike. In France, the day before, millions of workers,

the working class are on strike. With the communication technologies come an unprecedented possibility of coordinating our struggles and breaking through the national barriers.

“So I just want to conclude,” he added, “it is critical to build these rank-and-file committees and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.”



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