

UAW announces contract passes at Caterpillar amid widespread opposition: “I think it’s a huge sellout”

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Work at Caterpillar? Fill out the form at the end to tell us what you think of the tentative agreement and what you think workers deserve.

Shortly after 8:00 p.m. Central Time Sunday evening, the United Auto Workers claimed that its tentative agreement with Caterpillar had passed, while not releasing either the overall ballot totals or the breakdown by local or plant.

“The tentative agreement has been accepted by the membership in all the Locals,” Local 974 in the Peoria, Illinois, area stated in the text. “We will now begin to work under the New Contract. The Tentative agreement was ratified by 71.5%.”

Even assuming the results are accurate—and the UAW apparatus has a long history of illegitimate votes—it is not an expression of broad support for the deal. Many workers who voted “yes” did so because they had no confidence that the UAW would fight for anything better.

The announcement comes amid broad opposition among Caterpillar workers over the six-year contract. The deal, covering nearly 7,000 workers at the construction and mining equipment giant, provoked widespread anger among workers, particularly over the 19 percent total wage increases, a major cut in real pay with inflation running at 6.5 percent annually.

The Caterpillar Workers Rank-and-File Committee, formed by a group of militant workers, had campaigned for a rejection of the agreement in the run-up to the vote. The committee called for a 50 percent wage increase, cost-of-living raises to keep up with inflation, a massive reduction in health care costs and other demands “to provide workers a decent standard of living.”

The UAW bureaucracy, fearful of the level of opposition among workers to its pro-corporate agreement with management, worked to intimidate workers in the run-up to the vote with threats of potential plant closings if the deal did not pass. At the same time, the UAW released only a few pages of “highlights” promoting the agreement. It refused to distribute the full contract language to all workers, keeping the rank and file in the dark on the complete terms of what they were voting on.

At the conference center in downtown East Peoria where UAW Local 974 held its vote, police were stationed throughout the weekend. Seeking to prevent workers from exercising their First Amendment rights and voicing their opposition to the deal, Local 974 officials demanded that WSWS reporters leave without explanation, calling the police. In Decatur, Illinois, the day before, Local 751 officials also blocked workers from speaking to the WSWS outside the union hall, stating that “no press” was allowed.

The UAW’s assertion of the contract’s passage will resolve

nothing. Discontent will continue to grow among Caterpillar workers as the combined impact of rising prices and paltry wage increases make themselves felt. Caterpillar will inevitably respond to a downturn in the economic situation by seeking to attack the jobs of workers, notwithstanding its promises of “plant closing moratoriums,” which have routinely proven to be worthless, as the recent indefinite idling of the Belvidere Jeep plant near Rockford, Illinois, has once again shown.

The critical task facing workers remains the building of the Caterpillar Workers Rank-and-File Committee. Throughout the struggle, the committee has worked to articulate workers’ essential needs, arm them with vital information, and lay the groundwork for a communication and organizational network with which a far broader fight can be conducted.

“The right thing to do was to vote ‘no’ on this contract”

On Sunday, many workers who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* in East Peoria said that inadequate pay increases were a deciding factor in their votes against the deal. Peoria was the center of Caterpillar’s operations for much of the 20th century and still has the largest concentration of workers in the UAW, with over 3,000 workers in UAW Local 974 spread across a half dozen facilities in the metro area.

“The biggest issue is the money,” a worker with 18 years at Caterpillar said, one of a number who had a “vote no” shirt printed for the occasion. “I need \$30 an hour.”

Over the nearly two decades he has been at the company he said, “They’ve taken, they’ve taken, they’ve taken, and they’ve never given. The only difference this year, they didn’t take, but they didn’t give enough. But inflation is going up higher than what they’re giving us.”

Josh, a newer worker, said simply, “The bigger the bonus, the bigger the sellout!”

Workers at the vote in East Peoria spoke on a broad range of grievances driving their opposition to the deal.

A younger worker with two years at Cat said, “I saw what John Deere got. I didn’t think it really was in the same ballpark at all. They got cost-of-living-adjustment [COLA] raises and a lot of other benefits. I don’t see how it equals up to what Caterpillar just came to

with the tentative agreement. I would have been satisfied with COLA alone, but I knew it wasn't a part of this. So that's why I disagree with this contract.

"I mean, the cost of living right now—it's getting more expensive each year. I would like to have that guardrail so I can be safe no matter what the economy does, be more well set up for my family and everything.

"Inflation's just been crazy. We have just been doing what we have to do. I know a lot of other people have struggled too. So I think the right thing to do was to vote 'no' on this contract.

"I mean, some of my Ameren electricity bills over the winter were ridiculous, compared to what I was paying the year before. Everything's just getting higher and higher. Groceries, utility bills — everything.

"I don't have any kids right now. But I have a girlfriend that lives with me. And we plan on eventually having a family. Obviously having kids and family and everything isn't all that easy especially in this day and age. I definitely want to go back to school and everything and build off of that. But, you know, just the way things are right now, it's kind of hard to do that. And then try to keep up with the economy right now. And all the prices on everything.

"My girlfriend currently works in OSF Healthcare now. So they're kind of going through something similar as far as with nurses. They're struggling a lot with finding nurses right now. It's been a nightmare for nurses.

"I know a couple of people from 1994 that came in. And they've always been very disgusted with the way they've been treated. The past couple contracts had taken away so much."

"There are too many people that live paycheck to paycheck"

"I think Caterpillar can do better," Jeff, a third-generation Cat worker, said. The wage increases were not enough to keep up with the rising cost of living, and if inflation stayed at its current rate, by the end of the contract workers would be "worse off than we are now."

He added that Caterpillar's proposal to raise their match of 401k retirement contributions amounted to "pennies. It's just a little bitty number."

Describing the long-term deterioration in Cat workers' position, he explained, "Back in the day when my dad, my grandpa, my uncles worked at Caterpillar, it was *the* place to work. Back when I was a kid, it was 'wow.' Now, it's not that anymore. There's no pride in it. You know, Caterpillar just isn't where it is."

Characterizing the arrogance of the company towards workers, he continued, "They want to say 'we made record profits, billions of dollars, but we're going to give you guys *pennies*.'"

Jeff also spoke out about the lack of safety in the plants, particularly the lack of protections which the Occupational Health and Safety Agency (OSHA) say contributed to the death of Caterpillar worker Steven Dierkes last year. Dierkes, who had been on the job at the Mapleton Foundry for less than two weeks, fell into a vat of molten metal and was incinerated.

"I just pray that it was quick," he said. "How it happened and how OSHA or even our safety at Caterpillar even allowed that there weren't railings or wasn't a harness on the guy—yeah, that is just unbelievable something like that can happen."

Summing up his feelings on what was needed to win what workers need, he concluded, "I think a nice long strike would be the right way to do it. I think that there are too many people that live paycheck to paycheck."

Darian, another worker, said, "You look at these other companies that do what we do, and they get \$10 an hour more. Yet Caterpillar wants to just give us 7 percent more this year. We shouldn't have to just start off with 7 percent and even less for the rest of the six years. The pay hasn't changed much since 1996. They're a big business. And they know, if they just pull the plug on everybody, they can get new workers, and they really wouldn't care."

Adequate paid time off to deal with personal and family issues was also lacking, Darian continued. "I feel like people need to be approved for days off more often than not, because life gets stressful. Some people have kids, they need to stop and go get their kids. My sister flew in here to Chicago on a plane. And they would not let me leave to go pick her up from the airport. She was there for two hours until one of my friends decided to go get her. And yeah, I just felt like that was wrong, because I had PTO, which is partial time, you can leave hours before your shift is over. And I had that time. And I felt like, you know, I should have been able to just go get her either a comeback or just take the rest of the day off."

Another worker said he was voting "yes" but only because he felt he had no choice. He was disgusted at the profits the company was making. "I started out at \$18.86. We should be making at least \$25 for base pay alone. We should make more money and get a pension. They took away COLA. My dad worked at Keystone for 43 years. He started in 1979. So he still gets a pension."

He said he voted yes but added about the contract, "No, I didn't like it. I have two kids to care for. I'm 39. And I need that money to keep going. If I had my way, I would have asked for more.

"I live in a two-bedroom apartment. Seven years ago it was \$400. Now it's over \$900. Ameren also keeps raising electricity bills. I'm paying at least \$300 for energy per month. And I have two boys with disabilities, and they need 24-hour care."

"I think it's a huge sellout"

Workers at plants outside Caterpillar's main concentration of production in Peoria also voiced their opposition to the contract.

"I think it's a huge sellout," a worker at Caterpillar's plant in Pontiac, Illinois, said. "Pontiac, in particular, does mass layoffs and reductions in force after ratification, and I'm afraid I'm most likely part of that group. We need to stand up together and fight against both. CAT won't budge nor do they care. UAW just gives in to whatever CAT wants and always has. It's too bad that we have no real leaders to back us. What do we pay dues for?"

"We aren't even allowed to see the full tentative agreement—just what they want us to see."



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