

Caterpillar workers erupt in anger after UAW declares sellout contract ratified: “The whole thing feels like a sham”

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Work at Caterpillar? Fill out the form at the end to tell us what you think of the UAW bureaucracy's sellout and what you think workers deserve.

Caterpillar workers have responded with anger and disbelief after the United Auto Workers declared that the tentative agreement for a new six-year contract with the company had been ratified on Sunday.

UAW Local 974 in Peoria, Illinois, and Local 751 in Decatur announced via text messages to workers that the contract passed by 71.5 percent, but have not released the full vote totals or breakdowns by the different locals—nor the full contract language. On social media and in comments sent to the *World Socialist Web Site*, workers at Caterpillar were immediately suspicious of the vote outcome, as the UAW has a long history of ballot-rigging and undemocratically pushing contracts through.

“You better find all the ballots and make sure they haven’t been changed. Unbelievable!” a veteran Caterpillar worker out of Decatur said in disgust to the WSWS Sunday night.

Both management and the UAW expressed their satisfaction following the announcement of their deal’s ratification. “We are pleased to have reached what we believe to be a fair, reasonable and comprehensive agreement,” the company wrote on its website. The UAW headquarters, for its part, released a perfunctory three-sentence statement, writing cynically, “We commend the UAW-Caterpillar bargaining team for their hard work and UAW membership for their solidarity and support throughout this process.”

Even if the contract passed, however, it would not change the fact that the entire contract “negotiation” process was illegitimate and a mockery of “union democracy.”

Caterpillar workers were never informed of the actual content of the contract talks between the company and the union, which began in December. Mere minutes after the expiration of the previous contract, the UAW announced a tentative agreement, defying the nearly 99 percent strike authorization vote by Cat workers. The UAW then gave workers only three to four pages of “highlights” and refused to distribute the full contract electronically to all workers so that it could be carefully studied.

Union officials worked to cover up the full implications of the massive attack on real wages in the deal, which could see workers lose 20 percent of the value of their pay by 2029. At the same

time, workers were threatened, with locals reps telling workers that the rejection of the agreement would mean they would lose their \$6,000 ratification bonus, Caterpillar would close plants and the company would not return to the table for up to a year.

Only the Caterpillar Workers Rank-and-File Committee gave voice to the real aspirations and needs of workers, including demanding a 50 percent wage increase, COLA (cost-of-living raises), the restoration of pensions, reduced health care costs and more. The committee distributed a statement calling on workers to vote “no” and mobilize support among broader sections of the working class for a common fightback. Throughout, the committee worked to inform, educate and organize workers on the shop floor in their struggle against the UAW bureaucracy and the company.

“We feel like we’ve been sold out”

A Caterpillar worker in Peoria said he felt the UAW bureaucracy was “weak, pathetic and spineless.” He added, “They told us Cat may not go back to the tables for six months if we voted it down.”

A worker in Decatur told the WSWS, “All the people on my line are not happy about it. They feel like they’ve been sold out. Everyone I’ve talked to has a very negative opinion about it.”

“There’s not much to say about this contract that hasn’t been true of every contract since ’98 and before,” said a worker with over two decades at Caterpillar’s Mapleton foundry. “It’s ‘pattern bargaining’ for the new millennium. Threats, misrepresentation, empty promises, outright bribery with signing bonuses.

“The UAW give us emptier promises of a brighter, shinier contract *next* time,” he added with disgust. “This is the fifth ‘next time’ to sell me down the river. They say these things and they act all hurt, when not being belligerent, shedding crocodile tears over our ingratitude. After all they claim ‘we did the best we could.’ They speak to us like children as they lie and dissemble. They shame us for our ‘lack of faith’ or ‘loyalty’ to them! They mix religious and patriotic rhetoric to do so and imply we are either Judases or traitors. We know who really walked away, again, with their 30 pieces of silver!”

Another veteran worker in Decatur said, “I’ll never make up

what I've lost in wages. Eighteen years ago we started paying health insurance. I haven't had a raise in 20 years. Coverage is worse, and when we retire we won't be able to survive. Not appreciated at all. My quarterly bonuses were a joke. It's put on our regular paycheck and taxed 30 percent! I'd lose \$100 because my bonuses were crap."

“Are you gonna buy the house today or not? That's pretty much how it was”

Another Cat worker in East Peoria explained that the company and the UAW lied to workers about the signing bonus and used it as a bribe. “Workers were afraid to lose the \$6,000 bonus. I've heard people say they couldn't afford to not get it. Which is only going to be like \$3,000 after taxes. And what happens in two, three or four years? That \$3,000 is going to go fast.”

Noting that UAW Local 974 held “informational” meetings the same day as the vote, the worker from East Peoria said, “When I went to my question and answer portion, the official was saying, ‘We don't want to hide anything from anybody, the contract books are up here if anybody wants to look at it.’ It's the day we vote! There's no point now!”

He compared the process to the housing crisis that led to the global economic crisis of 2008–2009. “If you're going to buy a house, you want an inspection weeks ahead of time before you sign. ‘Are you gonna buy the house today or not?’ That's pretty much how it was. It's like the housing market crash, where people didn't get to see what was going on.”

Describing the attitude of UAW officials, he said they in effect told workers, “‘Here we have this contract,’ knowing that nobody could really inspect it. The only thing we could get were the ‘highlights’ and the \$6,000 sign-on bonus.”

He said that UAW officials suggested that if workers rejected the contract they would be left isolated on the picket lines for months, as the UAW did to workers at CNH last year. “A lot of the stewards went to the bargaining guys who compared us to Case/CNH,” he said. “Cat said they would not come back to the table. If we turn it down, it would be eight months to a year. They scared a lot of people with that.”

He added, “How do you know Cat won't come back to the table? The UAW gave up before you even know how many people wanna fight. If you're going out to battle, you should motivate people to fight. Instead they said, ‘we can surrender now and everybody will live.’”

Workers were in a strong position to strike, he added. “If you do go on strike, who are they gonna replace us with? They can barely get help as is. That was my theory on it.” He added that a forklift driver who was training to replace them in the event of a strike got injured and left with a medical note. “A couple days before we talked to the forklift person, there were other office workers who got medical exemptions. How many office people would come out on the floor?”

He warned that Caterpillar has further attacks prepared now that

the UAW has declared the contract ratified. “Every time we have a contract ratified, within a year's time, if not less, we always get a Reduction in Force and layoffs.

“Cat has always had an issue of hiring people to cover four to five months and then let them go. They promise the young kids you'll get a job and they quit the job they have and they end up getting laid off.”

“The battle isn't over. We will continue to fight”

John, a member of the Caterpillar Workers Rank-and-File Committee in Decatur describing how the UAW bureaucracy withheld information in its efforts to push through the contract, explained, “They gave workers limited access to the contract. There were only two full copies available at the union hall and only a week to review it ‘on your own time.’ There is no way workers would be able to do that. Not when you have people that have child care issues, appointments, all kinds of things going on in their lives.

“The whole thing feels like a sham. But the battle isn't over. And we will continue to fight.”

Addressing himself to other workers, he continued, “We have a new mission, a new direction. That mission, that direction is to connect all working class people, to build our rank-and-file committees and to show these corporations that we mean business. Not only must we show these corporations what we are made of, but we must show our own corrupt union leadership what we are made of as well.

“We must show them that we—the membership—are the ones in charge. That we have had enough of crooked officials profiteering from our hard work, and that we've had enough of questionable elections and voting. That we demand transparency at all times.

“This is our time, the time for workers to rise up to the occasion and make our voices heard once and for all. We must work tirelessly to unite all working class people under one ‘flag’ and that is the ‘flag’ of the working class. We must work tirelessly to raise up our brothers and sisters and tell them, ‘You will be heard! Your voice matters!’

“We must work endlessly to ensure that what happened yesterday with Caterpillar and the UAW does not ever happen again. Stand strong together my brothers and sisters and let us be righteous and fight!

“For we stand to fight for a brighter future for all working class people. Workers united will never be defeated! Power to the rank-and-file!”



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