

The UAW sellout at Caterpillar and the way forward

Caterpillar Workers Rank-and-File Committee
14 March 2023

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Fellow workers,

On Sunday, the UAW announced in a text message that their tentative agreement with Caterpillar had been ratified. Union officials claimed the vote was 71.5 percent in favor, without releasing the actual ballot totals, which workers have a right to know.

Given the long record of corruption and vote-rigging in the UAW bureaucracy, no one should take the results at face value. But even if the agreement passed, it would not make this contract any more legitimate. The deal is the product of an undemocratic operation carried out by the UAW officialdom on behalf of management and counter to workers' interests.

This is how this played out:

First, Cat workers were kept in the dark for months on the details of what was being discussed between the UAW and Caterpillar executives. We were given vague “updates” on bargaining lacking any important content.

In January, workers throughout Cat made clear that we wanted to fight when we voted by 98.6 percent to authorize a strike. With the company boasting of billions in profits every year, workers wanted to win back the concessions the union bureaucracy has been giving up for decades: Far higher wages after decades of freezes and the tier system. COLA to keep up with inflation. A massive reduction in health premiums and out of pocket costs. Adequate paid time off to spend with our families. Safe and decent working conditions. And a shorter contract.

But the UAW bargaining team and national headquarters ignored all of this. They never even informed workers what they had demanded from the company. There was zero transparency throughout this entire process.

The day before the contract was scheduled to expire, we were still being kept in the dark. Workers were increasingly pressing for a strike, which the UAW responded to by ordering us to stay on the line even if there was no contract

reached.

Then, shortly after midnight on March 1, they announced they had a deal with Caterpillar. At this point, the union apparatus set into motion their “voter influence” campaign, which they clearly had prepared well in advance.

They lied and misled about the contract. It was never clearly explained to workers that a 19 percent wage increase over six years, without COLA/cost-of-living adjustments, will mean a massive cut to real wages—as much as 20 percent if inflation stays at its current annual rate of around 6 percent. Workers will be making less by 2029 in real, inflation-adjusted terms than they are now.

The UAW's “Solidarity House” headquarters ordered the locals to not distribute the full contract to all workers electronically, despite having done so at Deere in 2021. They said we could see the contract at the union halls—knowing full well that people don't have time to go to the union hall for hours and sit and read a 100-plus page legal document. Workers have kids, doctor's appointments. The union officials deliberately played that card to pose as transparent, when in reality they deprived workers of any chance to meaningfully study and discuss the contract terms and make an informed decision.

Finally, workers were threatened with dire consequences if the contract wasn't ratified. We were told at various points that if we voted no, we would lose the ratification bonus. Or that the company would close all its UAW plants. Or that we would be forced into a drawn-out strike and isolated for months, a year or more, with nothing to survive on than a \$500 a week strike check. Many workers remembered how the UAW sold out the strikes in the 1990s and had no desire to repeat that experience.

UAW officials once again tried to present the company as all-powerful, and that this was “the best deal we could get.” These were also lies. The truth was that workers were in the strongest position we've had in decades, given the difficulty Cat already had with hiring and retaining workers. “One of the challenges Caterpillar has, from a contingency-planning perspective, is the tight labor market and availability of

replacement workers,” an executive with a manufacturing staffing agency wrote in early February.

If the same kind of lying, misrepresentation, withholding of critical information and threats that we faced were used to coerce a “signed contract” in the business world, it would be considered negotiated in bad faith and legally null and void. But this is the standard operating procedure used by the UAW bureaucracy and the corporations it fronts for.

However, what the UAW officials did not count on was workers organizing in opposition to their pro-corporate plans.

We made the decision to found the Caterpillar Workers Rank-and-File Committee earlier this year because we understood, based on the UAW bureaucracy’s previous record of sellouts and betrayals, that it would not fight for us, and that any real struggle for workers’ rights and interests would have to be organized from below.

The Cat Rank-and-File Committee has provided workers with a voice and a means of sharing information and communicating with each other, which workers have been deprived of for too long.

In opposition to the endless efforts to keep workers divided, we made explicit appeals to our brothers and sisters beyond the UAW: white-collar workers, workers at non-union Caterpillar plants and members of other unions, Cat workers internationally, and workers throughout the auto and heavy equipment industries. Our committee received statements of solidarity from workers in Indiana, Texas, Wisconsin, Ohio and elsewhere. We saw that workers everywhere are facing similar forms of corporate exploitation, and that there is widespread support for a unified struggle in the working class.

Lastly, the Caterpillar Rank-and-File Committee put forth a strategy based on an international perspective. As we explained in our founding statement:

We are part of a vast and internationally interconnected workforce, a source of immense strength to the extent that we leverage it. Caterpillar has dozens of manufacturing plants spread across North and South America, Asia and Europe. These workers are exploited and abused by the same company, and we must do everything we can to unite with them and coordinate our struggles.

Our committee, along with sister committees at auto parts maker Dana, General Motors, Ford, Stellantis and beyond the auto industry, is part of a growing network of militant workers organizations globally, the International Workers

Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

Whatever they may think, the UAW bureaucracy’s declaration that the contract has been ratified doesn’t settle anything. As experienced workers know, every new contract is followed sooner or later by layoffs and reductions in force. The entire economic system is teetering like a house of cards, as the recent collapse of Silicon Valley Bank shows.

Caterpillar management and the powerful corporate and financial interests behind it will seek to make workers pay the cost of any further deterioration in the economic situation, whether through layoffs, speed-up, or even worse working conditions, or a combination of them all. And we still don’t know what concessions may lie in the full contract, which we again insist must be distributed to all workers.

Brothers and sisters, the vote this weekend is not the end of the fight, but only its beginning. Whatever way you may have voted on the contract, we will extend an open hand in solidarity to all our fellow workers who believe that a struggle to secure and defend workers’ interests must be organized in each factory, warehouse and worksite.

The Caterpillar Rank-and-File Committee has laid the foundation. Now it must be built and expanded so that workers can prevail in the struggles to come. If you agree, contact our committee to discuss getting involved. Share this statement with your coworkers. Discuss what’s taken place and the way forward.

Power to the rank and file!

To contact or discuss joining the Caterpillar Workers Rank-and-File Committee, text CAT to (866) 847-1086, or fill out the form below.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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