

The unions' role in isolating the Caterpillar strike

Jeff Lusanne, Kristina Betinis
30 July 2012

Nearing their fourth month on strike, machinists at Caterpillar's Joliet, Illinois plant have shown great determination in their fight against the efforts by the company to impose a wage freeze and sharp increases in worker contributions to health care costs. Caterpillar is seeking to drive out older workers to allow the company to fill its workforce with new-hires, paid as little as \$13 an hour.

From the beginning of the strike, however, workers have confronted not only the ruthless determination of corporate management, but also the isolation of their struggle by the International Association of Machinists (IAM). Workers have been strung out on \$150 a week in strike pay. This sum is less, on a monthly basis, than rent for a modest apartment.

The IAM's strike fund has over \$100 million, and union executive pay is in the hundreds of thousands of dollars per year, not including perks.

The union has offered a food pantry, stocked by donations, including donations from other nearby unions. However, without extra income, food is only one of many essential expenses to be covered. For many, particularly the younger workers, it is impossible to stay financially afloat with no savings. Many workers have had to move and some are in foreclosure.

The Joliet workers' struggle has also remained isolated from the three other Caterpillar plants in Illinois, located in Peoria, Decatur and Aurora, organized by the United Auto Workers.

Tens of thousands of other CAT workers, organized in the UAW and United Steel Workers, continue to work, even using parts made by "replacement" scab workers at the Joliet facility. To date, the IAM's only public efforts to aid the strike have been a rally and two protest stunts outside Caterpillar's Peoria, Illinois headquarters, aimed at pressuring Caterpillar's wealthy

shareholders to effect some changes to the company's ruthless demands.

At the current rate, strike pay for the striking workforce costs between \$100,000 and \$125,000 a week. In 2011, over 160 lesser officials on the national payroll of the IAM were paid between \$100,000 and \$184,000 in salary, as well as anywhere from \$10,000 to \$70,000 in "allowances" and "disbursements for official business." This payroll for lesser officials amounted to \$38 million in 2011.

For the striking Joliet machinists, strike pay for 12 weeks has cost the IAM roughly \$1.5 million. This amount, distributed to over 700 workers, is less than the annual cost of the IAM's top nine officials, who collectively made \$2.5 million in 2011 in salary, allowances, and disbursements.

International President Robert Buffenbarger was awarded a salary of \$245,000. Divided over a 50-week work year, at 40 hours a week, this is almost \$125 *per hour*—compared to the \$150 weekly strike pay given to Joliet workers. Warren Mart, general secretary and treasurer, was awarded a \$339,000 salary in 2011.

Dues also went towards \$2.4 million dollars in political spending—that is, support for the Democratic Party, which is now leading the attack on the working class throughout the country.

This points to the fact that the opposition of the IAM to any attempt to seriously defend the interests of its membership is not simply a matter of immediate financial interests, but, more fundamentally, is bound up with its political support for the capitalist two-party system and corporate America.

A particularly revolting example of the union's subordination to the interests of the American ruling class was on display in a recent column by Buffenbarger attacking any cuts in defense spending.

The IAM is closely aligned with Lockheed Martin, which makes billions in profits producing the F16, and soon, the F35 fighter/bomber jet for the US military. After a two-month long strike, Lockheed workers returned to work July 2 at the Fort Worth complex in Texas. Lockheed Martin is preparing to cut weapons production by one-tenth.

Boeing has already begun paring down its workforce. As of June 2012, the company laid off 8,000 of its 60,000 workers over 18 months. Forty-five thousand active, retired, and laid-off Boeing workers are among the 700,000 workers the IAM represents.

These reductions did not stop Buffenbarger from penning an editorial with Marion C. Blakey, CEO of the Aerospace Industries Association, which represents all the companies in the aerospace industry. They write:

“Today’s technological markets have an appetite that our competitors will fill if we cede ground. Both China and Russia are pouring money into new fifth-generation stealth fighters that could rival our F-22s, F-35s and F-18s. Russia reportedly is investing \$650 billion in 600 new planes, 100 ships and 1,000 helicopters. Iran reportedly is trying to reverse engineer our drone technology. And North Korea’s nuclear missile program shows no signs of slowing down.

“No one disputes that America must deal with its budget problems, and there are savings to be had even in defense. But defense investments are little more than 1 percent of our gross domestic product, and as such they cannot be the solution to any meaningful long-term debt reduction.”

No doubt, rather than cut military spending, Buffenbarger supports the draconian attacks on social programs being planned by the ruling class, both Democrat and Republican.

Whatever its rhetoric, the IAM is in fact determined above all to maintain the profitability of the corporations—whether Lockheed or Caterpillar. This necessarily translates into support for the reduction in the living standards of workers.

The union’s hostility to the working class is above all evident in its support for the re-election of Obama, who has promised to revive US industry on the basis of poverty wages and the expansion of US militarism abroad.

The unions consider their central task to be the

isolation of any struggles that erupt, while seeking to prevent them from taking an independent political form that challenges the corporations and the capitalist system.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact