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One more Nail in the Coffin

Libertarian Labor Review

1992

When UAW President Owen Bieber agreed to send Caterpillar strikers back to work on April 14 under the terms of Cat management's final offer he drove another nail into the coffin of organized labor in the U.S.

Bieber's motive in capitulating to the world's largest earth moving equipment manufacturer was undoubtedly to preserve the jobs of 12,600 striking workers (and the dues revenue generated for UAW coffers?) who were threatened with permanent replacement by scabs.

Alternatives to surrender, risky as they might be, could have been implemented. Mass picketing, plant occupations, or a combination of both could have been set up to keep out any scabs. Thousands of unionists in the midwest who were anxious to come to the Cat strikers' aid would have responded to a call for active support. (On March 22, over 20,000 workers took part in a solidarity rally held in Peoria, Illinois; there had been short sympathy strikes of Cat workers in South Africa and Belgium, and even some talk of a general strike in some UAW locals.)

However, one has to wonder if other alternative tactics were even considered before the decision to surrender was reached.

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Although there has been some talk recently of implementing a work- to-rule to bring some pressure to bear on Cat management, the seeming lack of any creative thinking about strategy and tactics in the current economic climate only underlines the total bankruptcy of business unionism.

The capitalists declared war on labor over ten years ago, and the casualties suffered in this decade should have convinced any sober unionist — even a reformist one — that the long battle of attrition-style strikes is suicide. Not only that, the UAW's failure to organize any pre-strike actions to reduce Cat inventory going into the strike shows the severe short-sightedness, approaching blindness, of the trade union leadership. In addition, the fact that the rank-and-file were not even consulted, let alone allowed to vote, on the decision to return to work indicates that the business union leadership is more afraid of an active rank-and- file than anything else.

Of course, negotiations between UAW leaders, Cat executives and a federal mediator could produce a slightly improved contract for Cat workers. But the rank-and-file will remain largely marginal to the process, and this is the crux of the matter. The passivity and lack of self-organization of the rank-and-file makes the defense of hard-won conditions, let alone their improvement, virtually impossible — not only for Cat workers but for workers in all sectors of the economy.

Only when we decide to organize ourselves into self-managed, revolutionary class unions that recognize the irreconcilable conflict between labor and capital will we have the power to win.