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# Union Solidarity, Collective Struggle and the Caterpillar Labor Dispute, 1991-1998

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## UNION SOLIDARITY, COLLECTIVE STRUGGLE AND THE CATERPILLAR LABOR DISPUTE, 1991–1998

In "‘We Had to Stick Together’: Individual Preferences, Collective Struggle, and the Formation of Social Consciousness" (McCall, 2008), Phil McCall uses the United Auto Workers (UAW) dispute with Caterpillar, 1991–1998, to demonstrate the inadequacy of the Analytical Marxist framework in explaining the workers’ behavior during their nearly seven-year conflict with the company. I agree with McCall’s analysis of Analytical Marxism and concur with his statement that "Marxist theory (which is dynamic) argues that experience teaches workers that only through their cooperation can they further their own interests" (McCall, 2008, 147). Sometimes, nevertheless, cooperation in and of itself is simply not enough for attaining worker victory, as was true of the UAW’s labor dispute with Caterpillar, even though

McCall concludes that “given the structural conditions obtaining at the time, the final result, a holding action, can be seen as a victory” (171).

Moreover, McCall states: “Repeatedly, the workers would, at great risk to their individual material well-being, make stands in favor of solidarity” (149). While I believe that the UAW workers who actually participated in the second walkout launched a heroic and militant strike against Caterpillar, the strikers did not risk their individual material well-being in favor of union solidarity to the extent claimed by McCall. Furthermore, I argue that union solidarity was not nearly as high as McCall implies, and this ultimately contributed greatly to the second strike’s defeat.

Furthermore, McCall unnecessarily dichotomizes the concepts of “solidarity” and “individual material well-being,” implicitly arguing that one must inevitably occur at the expense of the other. Because of this, he romanticizes the practice of solidarity for its own sake rather than viewing how solidarity can be instrumental in improving an individual worker’s material well-being. As such, he glorifies the UAW’s two strikes against Caterpillar, exaggerates their effectiveness, and implicitly calls for their continuation even after, for all practical purposes, they were in trouble.

The point is not to downplay the importance of union solidarity, which is, of course, absolutely vital to any successful labor struggle. It is important to acknowledge, however, that union solidarity should not be celebrated merely because of its occurrence. Rather, what must be emphasized are the potential positive benefits that can accrue as a result of workers’ cooperation. This means that when certain types of solidaristic actions fail to bring about the desired goals, they should be abandoned and alternative forms of union solidarity should be implemented, if at all possible.

The purpose of this note, then, is to demonstrate how McCall misinterprets key aspects of the Caterpillar labor dispute while concomitantly overestimating the level of union solidarity present during the second strike; additionally, he overstates the ultimate success achieved by the union during its seven-year dispute with the company. I will argue that, instead of conducting a second authorized strike during 1994–5, the workers could have potentially used an alternative form of worker solidarity that might have been more effective, reducing their risk to harming their individual material well-being. Union solidarity and maximizing individual well-being, therefore, need not be mutually exclusive pursuits.

### *The 1991–2 Strike and How It Ended*

McCall (2008, 163) discusses how after negotiations concluded between the UAW and Caterpillar on November 3, 1991, the UAW leadership called a strike at only two Illinois plants, containing 2,400 workers, as opposed to

striking all the plants which would have brought out all 13,000 workers employed at the company. As McCall accurately recounts, five months into the work stoppage, the company sent letters to the strikers instructing them to return to work on April 6, 1992 (one week later) or to risk being permanently replaced. Furthermore, McCall concludes that the workers were confident that they could “resist such a move through solidarity. In other words, defections in the face of such threats can be averted through coalitional practice.” In defense of his position, McCall cites one of the strikers, Rich Giddens, who told him that it was *possible* that the company would replace strikers that did not return but that such an outcome was *improbable*.

Thus, when the UAW leadership ended the walkout on April 14 with the strikers returning to work “unconditionally” and the company implementing its final offer, McCall refers to it as “a surprise move” (164). If one understands the context, however, this is hardly the case. What McCall excludes in his reporting of the conflict is that on the first day upon Caterpillar’s announcement that it was seeking permanent replacement workers, the corporation received telephone calls from approximately 40,000 people throughout the United States asking about jobs. Not long thereafter, Caterpillar received employment applications from thousands of individuals and was already vetting them for permanent employment.

Additionally, this deal was brokered by a federal mediator. In exchange for the UAW terminating its walkout, Caterpillar agreed to stop screening applicants and to resume negotiations (Cimini, 1998, 6; Franklin, 2001, 103–4). Although it is impossible to know with absolute certainty, if the strike had continued, I believe Caterpillar would have hired these permanent replacement workers and unless the strikers could have prevented them from crossing the picket line, the situation that occurred during the Hormel Strike in Austin (Minnesota) during 1985–1986 (Rachleff, 1993; Green, 1990) would have been repeated at Caterpillar.

### *The UAW’s Second Strike Against Caterpillar*

After discussing the wave of wildcat strikes that the workers launched against Caterpillar during 1993 and 1994, McCall (166–7) relates how, on June 20, 1994, after recommencing contract talks “for the first time in two years,” the two sides met for only 40 minutes before negotiations broke down. In response, the UAW called for the second strike to begin on June 21. However, the Mapleton and Pontiac plants’ workers struck on June 20, with 6,000 additional workers walking out the following day.

Unfortunately, after relating these facts (167), McCall does not tell us anything that occurred during this 17-month strike. In the article’s next paragraph, he reports that after a number of “discreet” meetings between

the UAW and Caterpillar, the company presented the union with a contract proposal on November 28, 1995. At the December 2–3 membership meetings, the UAW leaders submitted the company's offer to the workers, informing them that "the union would unconditionally end the strike and cut off strike pay" no matter how the workers voted on the proposal. Considering the harshness of the offer, McCall concludes that most of the strikers "were prepared to continue the strike indefinitely," and states: "Unsurprisingly to anyone (outside of the company and the union leadership), the workers rejected the agreement by an overall margin of more than 80% (90% at some locals) the same weekend" (168).

McCall's implication is that the UAW leadership sold out the strike by ending it prematurely and that it could have been successful if it had been allowed to continue. But what McCall fails to tell us is that the strike was already in severe trouble and most probably had already been lost. While it is impossible to determine definitively whether the strike's continuation would have helped the union, it is highly unlikely. According to Cohen (2002, 84), Caterpillar remained highly profitable during the strike by staffing its assembly lines with "5,000 reassigned white collar employees, 3,700 full-time and part-time new hires, and 4,000 union members who crossed the picket line." For a union to conduct a successful strike, it must be able to have a negative impact on the company's profitability. Furthermore, there is no evidence that prolonging the walkout would have enabled the UAW to do this.

Besides omitting the fact that Caterpillar operated profitably throughout the strike, McCall fails to mention that the 4,000 strikers who crossed the picket lines represented 30% of the UAW's membership at the company. The shop floor expertise of the 4,000 UAW strikebreakers was a key reason why Caterpillar remained profitable during the walkout. Thus, union solidarity was not nearly as high as McCall implies in his article. Certainly, obtaining 70% of the vote in an election would demonstrate enormous support for a candidate; in a strike, however, such a percentage is far less impressive. And the UAW International realized this. When the union discovered that 25% of union members went back to work during the walkout's first week, the UAW International doubled strike benefits from \$150 to \$300 per week in order to encourage union solidarity and to discourage further defections. The union felt that additional strikers crossing the picket line would seriously harm the work stoppage (Bologna, 1998, 2). Within two weeks of the second strike's commencement, however, approximately 30% of UAW members were working. Thus, if the UAW were to implement a successful strike against the company, this would require a much higher level of union solidarity than having nearly one-third of its workers cross the picket line.

Other labor commentators feel that the lack of solidarity among the UAW membership was a major cause of the union's defeat in the 1994–1995 strike. Jones and Grey (1995) contend that the 4,000 union members who became picket-line crossers could have been dissuaded from taking this action if mass picketing had been implemented in an attempt to shut down the plants.

Furthermore, the outcome of the UAW members' contract ratification vote at the December 1995 meeting does not provide support for McCall's major contention that the workers risked "their individual material well-being. . . in favor of solidarity" and that they "were prepared to continue the strike indefinitely" (149, 168). Because the UAW International told the members *before* the vote that the strike would be terminated regardless of the vote's outcome and because this proposal was the same as Caterpillar's offer prior to the second strike's initiation (Bologna, 1995, 2; Cimini, 1998, 9), the workers had no incentive for approving the proposed contract. Since they were returning to work under the same conditions regardless of the vote's result, it makes sense that more than 80% of the workers voted to reject the proposal. By voting it down, there was at least some probability that any future contract offers would be superior to the 1995 proposed accord. A true indication of the strikers' militancy would have been if they rejected the 1995 contract *without* the UAW International assuring their return to work. Would the vote's outcome have been comparable under such conditions? Possibly, but I am dubious.

### *Obtaining a Contract in March 1998*

McCall implies that the "momentum in the dispute shifted perceptibly in 1997" (169) towards the union, eventually culminating in the workers ratifying a contract in March 1998, because of a National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) decision that the 1994–5 strike was due to (and subsequently extended by) the company committing a series of unfair labor practices. McCall maintains that this is important because if the NLRB deems that a strike results from a company committing unfair labor practices, the strikers cannot be permanently replaced. While McCall is technically correct, this fact is irrelevant because when this decision came down in January 1997, the workers were no longer on strike and none of them had been permanently replaced or were being threatened with permanent replacement!

McCall outlines the tentative contract provisions brought to the membership in February 1998 and the major reasons for its rejection (the requirement that 50 fired strikers' cases be arbitrated). He, nevertheless, incorrectly asserts that by continuing their strike they were demonstrating solidarity with the terminated workers (McCall, 2008, 170–2). At the time of this contract rejection, the workers were no longer striking; they had been working for more than two years (albeit without a contract).

Finally, McCall's statement that even "given the structural conditions obtaining at the time, the final result, a holding action, can be seen as a victory" (171), is, I would argue, at best an exaggeration and at the worst completely untrue. While describing the contract terms approved in March 1998, which guaranteed that the 50 fired workers would be allowed to return to work, undoubtedly an improvement from the February 1998 tentative accord, McCall fails to reveal the most sinister parts of the contract — specifically, that Caterpillar was allowed to determine union practices that should be, based on basic union principles, strictly internal union affairs. The ratified accord contained provisions "that all alleged violations of membership obligations since 1991 be waived" and that "unpaid back dues, reinstatement fees, fines, and penalties that could have been levied" against the 4,000 workers who crossed the picket-line be relinquished (Bologna, 1998, 3).

Given the insidious aspects of this collective bargaining agreement, I fail to understand how McCall can view this outcome as any type of union victory. If the standard for considering a union success in a strike is merely the attainment of a contract after the walkout ends, then any work stoppage that does not conclude with the actual breaking of the union and in which a signed collective bargaining agreement is obtained can be deemed a union triumph!

*Conclusion: What Could Have Been Done?*

Due to Caterpillar's strategy to hire permanent replacements in April 1992, five months into the first walkout, one can understand why the UAW International was hesitant to authorize a second full-fledged strike in June 1994. Indisputably, the union was concerned that Caterpillar would endeavor to operate during a second work stoppage which, as I discussed earlier, it was able to do successfully. Because of this, there is an alternative, ignored by McCall, which may have successfully pressured Caterpillar: a continuance of the UAW's 1993–1994 wildcat strikes.

As McCall correctly states, the UAW's in-plant tactics, utilized against Caterpillar shortly after the strikers returned to work in April 1992, were highly effective in pressuring the company (164). And as he points out, these actions eventually resulted in the conducting of wildcat strikes. Usually occurring between one and three days, these stoppages united workers in their opposition to management, ignited sympathy strikes and spawned increased levels of militancy. In fact, these walkouts between September 1993 and June 1994 hampered production and were particularly exasperating to the company, which did not know when and for how long the walkouts would take place (Cohen, 2002, 87). During this time period, the UAW wielded the most pressure on Caterpillar.

Undoubtedly, the motivation for the second walkout resulted from the shop floor rank-and-file militancy. Once the union launched an authorized strike against Caterpillar, however, it squandered the power that it had brandished against the company through implementing rolling wildcat strikes. Because it no longer had to deal with further in-plant walkouts, Caterpillar successfully stabilized production through utilizing white collar workers, new hires and union members who were picket-line crossers (as previously mentioned). Due to the company's plans to continue production during an extended strike, conceivably a superior strategy would have been to maintain the wildcat strikes instead of launching a sanctioned strike. Such a strategy would have necessitated that workers practice high levels of discipline, and pressure would have continued to be exerted on Caterpillar, something a prolonged strike failed to achieve, particularly when 30% of union members became picket-line crossers during the strike's first two weeks (Devinatz, 2005, 15).

Nevertheless, it is conceivable that this strategy would have been ineffective, too. With the wildcat strikes' continuation, worker demoralization and impatience at working without an accord may have set in, leading workers to ultimately believe that the only way to force the company into signing a new agreement would be to conduct a full-blown strike. Moreover, Caterpillar potentially intensifying its discipline against wildcat strikers might have forced them to either scale back or abandon their actions. The company might have even locked the workers out, which would have placed the UAW in circumstances similar to those of the 1994–1995 strike.

Unfortunately, we cannot rewind history to see if such a strategy would have been more successful than the one actually implemented by the UAW. Nevertheless, it can be asserted with confidence that the UAW's labor dispute with Caterpillar was in no meaningful sense any type of union "victory." More of these kinds of outcomes in the early 21st century would undoubtedly lead to irreparable damage to the U. S. labor movement.

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## NANOTECHNOLOGY AND THE DEVELOPING CRITIQUE OF SCIENTISM\*

While it may seem odd to respond to an article published in these pages more than six decades ago, John Jacobs’ musings on the “Development of Atomic Energy” in the summer of 1946 can be usefully revisited as we grapple with the profound issues raised by today’s major emerging technology — “nanotechnology,” the umbrella term for a wide array of new means of manipulating the basic structures and processes of matter and energy on the “nanoscale” (one billionth of a meter or less) of individual atoms and molecules, a domain hitherto inaccessible to human engineering.

Jacobs’ argument was straightforward. The development of atomic energy was “the greatest technical achievement in man’s history,” opening “new perspectives for human welfare [that] should eventually make possible sub-

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