

Thousands of US steelworkers rally in advance of contract expiration

By Shannon Jones
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Thousands of steelworkers employed at US Steel and ArcelorMittal rallied this week in advance of a September 1 contract deadline for both companies. The contracts for some 30,000 workers at the two steelmakers are up for renewal, with management demanding major concessions.

Both companies are calling for substantial cuts to boost their profits. According to the United Steelworkers (USW), ArcelorMittal is demanding a new contract that includes a three-year wage freeze, cuts in medical benefits, and a two-tier system with reduced pay and benefits for new workers. US Steel is also demanding the elimination of overtime payment after eight hours of work.

In an effort to put maximum pressure on steelworkers, US Steel announced last week the closure of a blast furnace at its Fairfield Works near Birmingham, Alabama and the layoffs of 1,100 workers. This followed the announcement by ArcelorMittal, the world's largest steelmaker, that it might shut one of its five hot strip mills in the US.

On Friday, steelworkers rallied in Gary, Indiana; River Rouge, Michigan; Granite City, Illinois; Braddock, Pennsylvania and Birmingham, Alabama. This followed a large rally in Virginia, Minnesota on Thursday attended by taconite miners and supporters. This year 1,500 miners, members of the United Steelworkers, have been laid off on the Iron Range as iron and steel prices have crashed. On Wednesday a reported 2,000 workers rallied in East Chicago, Indiana outside ArcelorMittal's offices.

The large turnout at many of the rallies expressed the determination of steelworkers to beat back concessions six years into the so-called economic recovery. Workers interviewed by the *World Socialist Web Site* rejected the suggestion that they pay for the continuing crisis of the steel industry.

However, a list of "talking points" distributed by the USW to members of the media did not say anything about resisting concessions. Instead, the USW praised past concessionary bargaining, stating, "Our innovative contracts made possible the resurgence of the industry prior to the global economic crisis of 2008." It continued, "If we continue to stand together we can do the same."

On Thursday, the USW reported that it made a formal

contract proposal to ArcelorMittal, which it is said would save the company "millions in short term expenses and long term liabilities." While details have not been spelled out, the deal evidently includes substantial concessions in wages, working conditions and benefits.

Speeches by USW officials at the rallies further underscored the bankruptcy of unions, which have made the slashing of wages and economic nationalism the center of their policies for decades. USW officials promoted the union's alliance with the Democratic Party and its policy of economic nationalism, laced with anti-Chinese demagoguery and calls for protectionism.

Conditions in all the areas where the USW conducted rallies illustrate the disastrous results of the USW policies—tens of thousands of jobs eliminated, communities devastated and pensions destroyed.

The expiration of the steelworkers contract coincides with the expiration of the labor agreement for 140,000 autoworkers at Ford, General Motors and Fiat Chrysler. Altogether some five million US workers face contract expirations in 2015. Rather than wage a united struggle, the unions are working to keep workers divided. They have blocked strikes and extended the contract for hundreds of thousands of workers at Verizon, the US Postal Service and AT&T as well as teachers across the US. When the contract for 30,000 US oil refinery workers expired earlier this year, the United Steelworkers only called a partial strike of 6,500 workers. These workers were isolated and starved on the picket line for month with the union ultimately signing a contract that ignored workers' main demands.

On Friday, WSW reporting teams distributed copies of the statement "For a united offensive of autoworkers and steelworkers against the corporate government assault" to US Steel workers attending rallies in the downriver Detroit suburb of River Rouge, Michigan and in Gary, Indiana.

In Gary about 2,000 steelworkers rallied downtown. Among those attending were active and retired steelworkers as well as former striking oil refinery workers from the BP facility in Whiting.

Marchers observed a moment of silence for a steelworker who died Friday on the job at the ArcelorMittal mill in Burns Harbor, Indiana. According to press reports, the Porter County Coroner Chuck Harris said the 61-year-old ArcelorMittal

steelworker fell to his death and that an autopsy has been scheduled for Monday.

A worker interviewed by WSWS reporters expressed frustration with concession demands, saying, "What are they giving up? I refuse to work in reverse."

Rick said in regard to the company demands, "You're not giving me anything in return!" He complained that "They're taking Sundays!" by which he explained that it would no longer be automatic time and a half on Sunday, only if workers labored past 40 hours in a single week.

Another worker said, "Someone is always getting hurt in there," adding, "if it comes down to it, we will go on strike."

A retiree expressed anger at companies trying to lower wages, saying, "You drop the wages and everything else keeps going up!"

USW officials shut down the rally after 45 minutes of perfunctory remarks. Prominent place on the speakers list was given to Gary Mayor Karen Freeman-Wilson, a Democrat. She was joined by the Republican mayor from nearby Portage and the Democratic mayor of Hobart. A series of Democratic administrations in Gary have presided over the transformation of a once vibrant industrial city into a wasteland of vacant and abandoned buildings. In her remarks, Freeman-Wilson offered nothing but the chauvinist demagoguery typical of the Democratic Party, denouncing "unfair trade" and "inferior" Chinese and foreign steel.

In River Rouge, Michigan, about 400 workers attended the rally, held outside the USW Local 1299 union hall on East Jefferson Blvd. The workers at the rally were employed at US Steel's Great Lakes Works and gave a warm response to the call to unite auto and steelworkers. A favorite chant of marchers was "No concessions."

As in Gary, the rally was brief, with the workers marching several blocks down the street before returning to the union hall and dispersing. In comments to WSWS reporters, there was strong agreement on the need for a united struggle. "I don't see why they don't shut everything down together," one worker said.

Brian, a worker with 21 years at the Great Lakes Works, told the WSWS, "We have only 10 days until the contract expiration and they are not giving in to anything. They might just lock us out, but we are going to put up a fight.

"They are blaming the downturn in steel, but we can't help that. We make quality steel and they are still shutting down plants, like Fairfield and in the Mon Valley (Pennsylvania.)"

A worker with 25 years said, "They are taking us back 50 years. It's rough, dangerous work and they want to pay us like McDonald's. On top of that they want to screw retirees out of medical. They also want to take away bidding rights like we are a nonunion shop."

When asked about the two-tier wage agreed to by the United Auto Workers, he replied, "We don't want two-tier. That's not good."

Workers told the WSWS that grueling work shifts were common. "They force guys to work 16 hours regularly," said one veteran worker. It is particularly bad for women who have kids."

John Wendt, an electrician with eight years experience, and Jennifer Neumann, another electrician, stopped to speak with the WSWS. John said he was strongly opposed to concessions. "I don't think we should give up anything," he said.

He bristled at talk of the introduction of a two-tier wage. "I think it is detrimental to employees. It is not right to hire someone off the street for less money and then still expect him to do the same work as other employees."

He said seven-day work schedules were common. "It is now seven days and then a day off."

Jennifer added, "Right now skilled trades are guaranteed 60 hours a week or they have to get rid of contractors. They want to take that away so they can hire as many contractors as they want. They would rather hire contractors because they don't have to pay them benefits."

John continued, "Everything we do is dangerous. Besides long hours there is only so much we can put up with. To take concessions in a job where you don't know if you are coming home the next day is ridiculous. We are hardworking people trying to make a living. Everything is going up, but wages have been going down.

"Ever since 2003 they have not put in one new line in the plant. They have done nothing but milk the plant. Then they come to us and complain about quality. The rich guys are getting richer, and they are saying to heck with us."

In Birmingham, Alabama, a WSWS correspondent spoke with steelworkers protesting the closure of the Fairfield works. Workers detailed the devastation that would be caused by the closure. They noted that two workers were killed at the mill last year and another maimed. The first fatality was burned alive at the plant and the second died at the hospital.

At third-generation steelworker spoke about his concern over losing health insurance and wage stagnation, adding that it was hard to get US Steel to fix malfunctioning equipment and to supply adequate safeguards against accidents.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>