

Allegheny Technologies lockout enters third week

By Evan Winters
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The lockout of 2,200 steelworkers at Allegheny Technologies Inc. (ATI) at 12 mills in six states has entered its third week. With the backing of the major steel corporations, ATI management has dug in its heels, rebuffing offers of major concessions from the United Steelworkers union (USW) and stonewalling on any negotiations since the lockout began August 15.

ATI is demanding steep increases in out-of-pocket health care expenses and the elimination of pensions for new hires, essentially creating a two-tier wage and benefit system. In addition, ATI wants to expand the use of outside contractors and impose work rule changes that would turn workers into casual laborers, with irregular and unpredictable shift times, less access to overtime pay and worse working conditions.

After more than two weeks, workers still have not received unemployment benefits, which they are entitled to during a lockout. The USW is maintaining its policy of withholding strike pay from its \$350 million strike fund until the fourth week of the lockout. Once the fourth week comes, the USW will distribute \$200 per week per locked-out worker to the locals. The locals will then distribute the money as they see fit, using the distribution of these funds as another method for disciplining the rank and file.

Since the lockout began, ATI has imported a scab workforce from strikebreaking labor contractor Strom Engineering, backed up by a small army of private security guards. ATI has been preparing this extremely provocative strategy for years. The company is well aware that the USW, whose Pittsburgh headquarters is less than an hour's drive away from where half of the locked-out ATI workers are picketing, will do nothing to mobilize workers to oppose these ruthless measures.

On the contrary, it is enforcing the isolation of these embattled workers. Last Friday, the USW ordered

30,000 workers at US Steel and ArcelorMittal to continue working past the September 1 contract deadline. With the vast majority of steelworkers demobilized, ATI management will only be encouraged to escalate its offensive.

The brutal implications of ATI's strategy were graphically confirmed Friday when picketing worker Jim Dietz was taken to the hospital after being struck by a van carrying ATI strikebreakers. As of this writing, the hit-and-run incident has gone unreported in the local media, except one small local newspaper, the *Valley News Dispatch*, in which a brief write-up was buried in the inside pages.

The driver of the van has not been arrested. This is despite the fact that the assailant returned to the factory, allowing picketers to identify his license plate to the police. There is little doubt that if a worker had committed such an action they would have been immediately arrested or worse.

Workers at the ATI Brackenridge hot strip mill reported that strikebreakers injured another worker in Washington, Pennsylvania.

The USW has maintained a stony silence on the incident, fearful that it could spark outrage and widespread sentiment among workers throughout western Pennsylvania to break the isolation of the locked-out workers. Such a fight would threaten to blow up the cozy relations the USW has long established with the steel bosses and the government.

A real struggle would also expose the character of the USW's alliance with the Democratic Party, which just as much as the Republicans is dedicated to slashing the wages and benefits of workers to boost corporate profits.

Earlier this year, May 1, USW president Leo Gerard shared a stage with US Senator Bob Casey

(Democrat-Pennsylvania), and Democratic Braddock Mayor John Fetterman at a rally outside a US Steel mill in Braddock, Pennsylvania. Gerard and Casey took turns whipping up anti-Chinese, anti-Japanese, and anti-Mexican poison and economic nationalism. Behind all the talk about alleged “dumping” by foreign steelmakers and “currency manipulation,” both deliberately sought to conceal the fact that the attack on workers’ jobs and living conditions was being spearheaded by Wall Street and multinational corporations, which have the full backing of the Obama administration.

While promoting this rabid nationalism to divide US workers from their class brothers and sisters around the world, the USW sought to give itself an “internationalist” cover by organizing a token visit to some of the ATI picket lines last week by trade union “activists” from across the US, Canada and Sweden. Like the USW, all of these unions have a treacherous record of betraying workers and serving the interests of the corporations in their “own” countries.

The USW put on a similar stunt during the six-week oil workers’ strike earlier this year, bringing in delegations from the South African National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), along with the UK and Ireland public sector UNITE union, and the Australian Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union. The presence of the South African union was particularly provocative given that NUM officials responded to a 2012 rebellion by striking platinum miners with gunfire, killing two workers, and assisting in the police murder of another 32 strikers. The USW managed to isolate and sell out the oil workers strike without bullets.

Steelworkers are under attack all across the world. Following the economic slowdown in China, demand for steel has fallen sharply, leading to a steep fall in steel prices. In July, Tata Steel Europe announced 720 job cuts in UK-based facilities in South Yorkshire and West Midlands. This week Australian company BlueScope Steel demanded 500 job cuts at its Port Kembla plant in New South Wales, threatening to close the plant entirely and lay off its entire 2,500-strong workforce. In New Zealand, BlueScope Steel has threatened to entirely shut down its subsidiary New Zealand Steel.

Workers are not faced with a simple temporary

downturn in the steel industry, but a massive restructuring of the global steel industry. The USW’s stated strategy of holding out “one day longer” will not pressure ATI to return to the negotiating table, let alone prevent another concessionary contract.

In contrast to the USW’s isolation of the ATI workers, there was broad recognition among picketing workers that their success required a broad working-class response, including an expansion of a strike to other steelworkers and other industries.

Norm Volpe, a worker at the ATI plant in Latrobe, Pennsylvania expressed these sentiments. “I think there should be a nationwide strike of the working people, just the blue-collar American working person. To get this country straightened back up, for the workers, not the higher-ups, not the corporate greed that goes on in this country.”

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