

Allegheny Technologies steelworker speaks out on teachers' strikes

By Evan Winters
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The recent struggles of teachers in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona, North Carolina and across the country have inspired workers of many walks of life across the United States and the world.

Beth Cribbs, a retired steelworker with over 28 years of experience at Allegheny Technologies Inc. (ATI) in Western Pennsylvania, was eager to express her support to educators. In a discussion with the *World Socialist Web Site*, she said: "I'm glad to see what they're doing and uplifted by it. I support them very much.

"One thing I like is that they're trying to get better wages for themselves, but they're more about helping the kids, getting more money for the schools and stopping the austerity measures that the governments are pushing. They're there for the kids. It's not just about the money. They need the money, but it's not just about that," she said, emphasizing that the teachers' struggles have taken the form of a broader social struggle.

The steelworker speaks from bitter experience. Beth was of one of 2,200 steelworkers in six states who were locked out of their jobs on August 15, 2015. The company's "last, best and final offer" consisted of thousands of dollars in increased out-of-pocket healthcare costs for current and retired workers, an effective wage cut of \$1.50/hour, large-scale expansion of the use of outside contractors, huge concessions on scheduling, and the elimination of pensions and retiree healthcare for new hires in favor of inadequate 401(k) plans.

The steady demands for givebacks—forced upon steelworkers, autoworkers and other industrial workers—similarly sparked the statewide walkouts of educators this spring. The issues are all too similar: drastic healthcare cuts, attacks on and elimination of

pension benefits, and more work for less pay.

When rank-and-file teachers defied the unions by carrying out statewide walkouts beginning in West Virginia last February, the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) immediately moved to place a straitjacket on these struggles and shut them down. The well-heeled union bureaucrats decamped from their Washington, DC, offices to fly to West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona—all with the aim of preventing the walkouts from linking up and mushrooming into a nationwide offensive. This strikebreaking policy was of a piece with the backstabbing by the United Steelworkers union (USW) that occurred at ATI.

At Allegheny Technologies the USW deliberately isolated the locked-out workers from their class brothers and sisters for seven months, blocking any strikes or solidarity action as contracts came up for 30,000 steelworkers at US Steel and ArcelorMittal, 2,500 miners at Cliffs Natural Resources, as well as autoworkers and telecommunication workers.

At the same time, the USW permitted the company to bring in scabs with impunity. One picket, James Dietz, was hospitalized after being struck by a van carrying scabs into a Brackenridge, Pennsylvania, mill. In fact, scabs repeatedly threatened pickets with physical violence, yet the union's response was to order workers not to disrupt the scabs. Demonstrating their collusion with ATI in seeking to literally starve out the workers, local USW officials returned undistributed strike pay to their higher-ups, while restricting financial assistance to measly \$100 grocery gift cards, an insult to hard-pressed workers and their children.

Beth noted parallels in the reactionary role of the teachers' unions in pushing through sellout deals which failed to meet the teachers' demands: "The

unions aren't supporting them. I thought teachers' unions were better." As to the WSWS *Teacher Newsletter's* call for rank-and-file committees, independent of and in opposition to the trade unions, Beth said: "I think it's great. If the unions aren't going to do something, they [the teachers] can do it another way, whatever it takes."

She concluded: "The teachers are going ahead and doing that [advancing the struggle] anyway. If enough people get involved and get in the street, things will happen. They seem like they're all sticking together. With the teachers, everybody shows up. The kids are supporting them, the parents, the communities. It's great that they're getting support like that."

On a personal note, Beth told the WSWS, "I'm sorry I didn't become one [a teacher] when I went to school to be one for four years." Beth continued: "I went to work in the steel mill instead. Now that I'm retired, I'm thinking about becoming an aide and supporting special needs kids.

"You don't get paid much, but it's not about that," she reflected.

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