

Machinists on strike at Berkshire Hathaway-owned Special Metals in New Hartford, New York

By Steve Filips
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Last Saturday, more than 200 workers at Special Metals in New Hartford, New York, outside Utica overwhelmingly rejected the company's most recent contract proposal and walked out on strike at 12:01 a.m., setting up picket lines outside the factory.

While the workers are on strike, salaried employees along with scabs that are being bused in are attempting to restart the plant.

The 236 workers are members of the International Association of Machinists Local 2310 (IAM). According to press reports, Ron Zegarelli, the IAM chief steward at Special Metals, said there are 211 production workers and 25 technicians that constitute the workforce that struck the plant.

As of this writing, the IAM has not posted any news of the weeklong strike on its website or social media accounts. According to workers on the picket line, the union informed them that it would be weeks before they would get any strike pay.

The major issue of contention for workers is the excessive amount of mandatory overtime that has had an adverse impact on the workers personal lives. The plant operates 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, producing specialized alloys, with the company demanding a 60-hour workweek. Workers report that there are few temporary employees, and the company doesn't want to hire new people to lessen the overtime.

The plant manufactures nickel alloy metals for the aerospace industry including General Electric (GE), its largest customer.

Last week, 6,600 GE workers across the US, including IAM members, had concessions forced on them by the unions after rejecting the initial contract offer in July.

Workers at GE plants in the nearby Schenectady area, as well as in Lynn, Massachusetts, had voted to approve strike action and, in a show of resurgent militancy against concessions, unexpectedly rejected the initial tentative agreement put forward by the company and the International Union of Electronic Workers and Communications Workers of America (IUE-CWA) negotiating committee, which was the lead in negotiations at GE. With a few minor revisions, the IUE-CWA brought the contract for a re-vote and won ratification from members.

Special Metals is owned by behemoth multinational conglomerate holding company Berkshire Hathaway, which has two of the four richest people on the planet involved in its management—the 88-year-old chairman and chief executive Warren Buffett, who has accumulated \$85.4 billion, and Bill Gates of Microsoft with a net worth of \$103.7 billion—sitting on the Board of Directors. The company was worth \$496 billion as of September 2018 and is currently the third largest US-based corporation by annual revenue behind Exxon Mobil and Walmart.

Special Metals, headquartered in New Hartford, was last bought in May 2006 by Precision Cast Parts, a manufacturer for the aerospace, civilian and military sectors. Precision Cast Parts in turn became a subsidiary of Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway in January 2016.

David Dugan, Special Metals' director of communications, told the *Observer-Dispatch* that the company is countering the strike by "leveraging other production facilities" and that "we are well positioned to meet our customers' needs." The Special Metals plant in Dunkirk, New York, a four-hour drive away,

was still in operation, along with plants in Burnaugh, Kentucky; Elkhart, Indiana; and Hereford, England.

Roughly 400 GMB union members at Special Metals Wiggin factory in Hereford have voted to begin a strike against overtime on August 26, which could become a full strike according to GMB union representative Stuart Harrison. Like their brothers and sisters in the US, one of the top complaints of workers in England is that they are being forced to endure the excessive overtime that has been wrecking families.

The company also owns the largest nickel alloy production facility in the world in Huntington, West Virginia, and in August 2018, management commanded more than 500 workers, members of the United Steelworkers union (USW), to leave the plant before the expiration of their contract. This resulted in a four-day lockout that ended after workers were forced to vote on a contract.

Workers on the picket line are being closely watched by local police and private security guards specially hired by the company. IAM union officials have also been participating in the picket in order to police striking workers.

Rod, a veteran worker at Special Metals, told the WSWS about prior cuts that the union and company had implemented: “In 2003, it was deemed that the pension was close to being insolvent and barring reforms it would go bankrupt, so they somehow changed the 30-years-and-out rule to where now you have to work until you’re 65. This is physically exhausting and dangerous work, and they just want you work until your last for them.”

Alan, a younger worker spoke of about the difficulties he faces with an unstable schedule but noted that “since I have less seniority, I have less security and have to remain quiet.”

When asked what he thought about workers forming rank-and-file committees to reach out to workers internationally, Alan replied, “I agree and think that a good example would be with the other plant the company has in England, where I heard that workers there were going through the same as we are.”

Another veteran worker, William, said “that the management was shocked when the technicians had joined with production workers in voting down their separate agreement that had greater pay raises than the production workers’ agreement.” Asked why the union

would have agreed to a contract that divides workers, he added, “I don’t know, but it was some kind of bullshit deal that was allowed that worked to keep workers against each other.”

In a show of working class unity, he further stated that “We voted it down because we wanted to stand in solidarity with our fellow brothers and sisters and not stab them in back, and we’re also considering the next generation and know that we have to draw a line and fight it out now.”

Despite workers’ determination and solidarity, the IAM is collaborating with management to isolate and wear down workers’ opposition to concessions at the New Hartford plant. The fight for better working conditions and living standards will not be won on a local or national basis.

Special Metals workers in New Hartford can break through the isolation being imposed on them by forming a rank-and-file committee independent of the trade unions to reach out to and unify with other sections of the international working class, including workers at Special Metals in England and the autoworkers at GM, Ford and Chrysler across the US whose contracts are expiring next month.

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