

US steelworkers strike Kaiser Aluminum

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Three thousand workers, members of the United Steelworkers of America, went on strike at Kaiser Aluminum's five unionized plants in the US Wednesday night. The workers walked out over company demands to outsource jobs, limit wage and benefit improvements, increase productivity and lengthen the workday.

The strike is centered in the Pacific Northwest state of Washington where more than 2,000 workers are picketing Kaiser's two biggest plants, the Mead smelter and Trentwood rolling mill in Spokane, as well as a smaller smelter in Tacoma. Hundreds of other workers are striking specialized facilities in Gramercy, Louisiana and Newark, Ohio.

The \$3 billion company, the nation's fifth largest aluminum manufacturer, employs 9,600 workers in facilities in eight countries, including bauxite mines in Jamaica and Queensland, Australia and rolling mills in Ghana and Wales. Kaiser produces aluminum products for aerospace, beverage can, automotive, construction, telecommunication wiring and industrial markets.

Battered by overcapacity throughout the industry, plummeting aluminum prices and the influx of cheaper aluminum from overseas manufacturers, Kaiser management is insisting that it lower labor costs. Its final proposal, rejected by the USWA leadership, included a 55-cent raise for each year of a five year contract, the elimination of 400 jobs at the Spokane plants and the demand for 'flexible' scheduling which would allow the company to increase the workday from 8 to 12 hours with no overtime pay.

In the mid-1980s the USWA granted Kaiser millions of dollars in wage and benefit concessions when the company faced a financial crisis. Workers want to recoup their losses and achieve wage and benefit parity with employees at similar-sized aluminum companies, such as Alcoa and Reynolds.

Raymond J. Milchovich, Kaiser's president and chief operating officer, said, 'Kaiser's US operations must adapt to the pressures of an increasingly global and competitive aluminum industry. The ultimate vehicle for job security

is capital infusion for facility renewal and state-of-the-art technology. We have a sincere interest to invest in our North American facilities; however, we will invest for ultimate shareholder value.'

Kaiser is 63 percent owned by Houston-based Maxxam Inc., which is controlled by Texas financier Charles Hurwitz. A corporate raider and close associate of junk-bond broker and convicted felon Michael Milken, Hurwitz is infamous for looting workers' pension funds and dismantling the companies he takes over.

In the late 1980s and 1990s, with the USWA's blessing, Kaiser sold off many of its operations. In 1989 the company sold its huge Ravenswood, West Virginia smelter to a group of investors who immediately set out to destroy the workers' hard-won conditions. In the space of two months four workers were killed in the plant, including a 18-year veteran who was forced to work back-to-back shifts on the mill's pot line where temperatures reached 150 degrees. The company, which many workers believed was still controlled by Kaiser, provoked a bitter strike which was isolated by the USWA leadership and defeated. In the meantime, the union leadership negotiated a concessions contract with Kaiser and plant-by-plant agreements at other facilities which allowed for the further destruction of thousands of jobs, and the erosion of working conditions for those who remained.

In the current strike Kaiser management is determined to press ahead with its strikebreaking plans. After the walkout began Milchovich stated, 'Our top priority at this point is to keep the plants running smoothly and meet the expectations of our customers.' According to a union spokesman the company has prepared for a long strike. In Spokane trailers have carried equipment in and out of the plants and the company has been training strikebreakers at a nearby industrial park for months. They have brought in temporary workers from Oregon, Montana and other states, and housed them along with management personnel. The company advertised for strikebreakers as far away as Missouri and has brought in 136 security guards to escort them through the picket lines.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Tim Charbonneau, an executive board member of USWA Local 329 in Spokane. He said, 'The union rejected Kaiser's last contact offer and began the strike last night. This is not about money, but about contract language and the protection of jobs. The company wants to eliminate 400 jobs at the Spokane mill that have been here for 50 years. They want to contract out these jobs.'

'Kaiser is doing real well. They made \$400 to \$500 million in profits over the last five years. But they are saying they have to compete with overseas plants and need more flexibility. We are the only ones left in the unionized plants. Ten or fifteen years ago there were 6,000 to 7,000 steelworkers at this company. Now there are 3,000. In the Trentwood mill there are only 1,100 workers left out of 2,300; at Mead, only 900 out of 1,500.'

'In the mid-1980s the company came to the union and said they would go under unless we gave them concessions. Each worker gave up \$4.50 an hour in wages and benefits. In exchange we got Series A stocks. But these did not pay dividends and we got about 55 cents on every dollar we gave up. Many guys took retirements to cash in their stocks and the majority of workers in the plants, younger workers 18 to 24 years old who were hired over the last six or seven years, won't get a penny from stocks.'

The union official said the USWA planned to file an unfair labor practices complaint, but had no plans to mobilize other sections of workers against Kaiser. This same policy has left hundreds of steelworkers to languish on picket lines for months, if not years, in similar struggles such as Oregon Steel's CF&I subsidiary in Pueblo, Colorado and Titan Tire in Des Moines, Iowa.



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