

Davenport, Iowa aluminum strike in second month

A WSWS reporting team
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Workers at Nichols Aluminum in Davenport, Iowa have been on strike since January 20. In the first strike at the firm since the 1960s, the workers are opposing a concessions contract demanded by the company.

As in concessions contracts imposed at the Big Three auto companies and smaller firms such as Cooper Tire in Findlay, Ohio, executives at Nichols are demanding the implementation of a two-tier wage system. New-hires would make as little as \$15 an hour, down from \$20 in the previous contract. Older workers correctly see the two-tier system as the first step in forcing out more senior, better paid employees.

The company is also demanding a four-year wage freeze and significant increases in employee health care costs. The workers' share of premiums would increase to 20 percent and their deductible would increase to \$6,000. This is on top of further increases in co-pays and other out-of-pocket expenses.

Nichols Aluminum was purchased in 1998 by Quanex Building Products Corporation, a Fortune 500 company. Since that time, workers have faced increased demands for concessions, from mandatory furlough days to wage freezes, culminating in the current concessions contract being demanded.

The *Quad-City Times* reported that prior to contract negotiations, Nichols had already laid off 34 workers and eliminated a production shift, citing reduced demand from the construction and building industry. Since the strike began, the company has attempted to keep production going by hiring temporary labor and making use of salaried employees. Nichols has threatened to hire permanent replacement workers.

The production facilities in west Davenport produce coiled sheets of aluminum by remelting scrap. The coiled sheet is then purchased and fashioned into its final form by another company, typically in the

building or construction industry. Nichols employs nearly 350 workers at its two facilities in Davenport, about 250 of whom are represented by the Teamsters. They have been working without a contract since November 15.

Davenport is part of the Quad-Cities region, which straddles the Mississippi River and includes cities in both Iowa and Illinois with a combined population of nearly 400,000. As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted previously, the Quad-Cities is "a region that has already suffered significant industrial job losses during the economic crisis of the late 1970s and 1980s, when corporations such as International Harvester in Rock Island closed due to the farm-labor crisis" (see, "Illinois continues to shed jobs").

In addition to International Harvester, other agricultural equipment manufacturers such as Case IH and Caterpillar closed plants in Bettendorf. John Deere, whose headquarters are in Moline, slashed its Quad-Cities labor force by a full 50 percent. Since that time, the region has struggled to recover economically. Unemployment during the current "recovery" has either not declined or risen, with the rate in Rock Island County increasing from 8.4 percent to 9.6 percent from 2010 to 2011.

WSWS reporters spoke to workers on the picket line. John Thurston said the workers were striking in order to maintain their standard of living. "I've been here 40 years and made a good living so far," he said. "We're just asking to keep what we had."

Another worker, Ted Buckley, said, "We're not saying they're monsters, but it's unfair what they're offering."

Responding to company and media smears against the workers, who are routinely depicted as demanding and greedy, Thurston said, "I know what I make for the

company. All we want is a small portion of what we make [for them].” When asked about the two-tier system the company is demanding, he said “You can’t have two people working right next to each other, doing the same job and making different wages.”

Bucklay said there was strong support for the strikers in the community and among family members. “That’s one positive, how our families have all hung together,” he said. While the WSWS reporters were speaking to the picketing workers, many passing motorists honked and waved in support.

When asked about the national election campaign, picketers expressed disgust. “I just want it to be over. I’m sick of it,” Thurston said. Another worker said, “I learned a long time ago that you can’t believe what they promise you.”

Discussing the response of both President Obama and Illinois Governor Pat Quinn to the economic and social crisis—namely, tax cuts and more deregulation for corporations—Bucklay said, “There’s no guarantee that they’ll do right by the workers just because you give ‘em a tax break.”

While the strike at Nichols has continued, six unions representing Davenport city workers have agreed to a new three-year concessions contract. The contract includes a wage freeze for the first year and increases each year in the amount workers must pay towards their health insurance premiums.



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