

Two strikers arrested at West Virginia aluminum plant

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Two strikers have been arrested for allegedly throwing jack rocks August 8 at tractor-trailers driving through their picket line at the Constellium Plant in Ravenswood, West Virginia. State police allege that several strikers on the picket line threw the objects (made of nails welded together) into the path of the oncoming vehicles, flattening the tires of three trailers and smashing the windshield of one of the trucks.

The 700 striking aluminum workers are members of United Steelworkers Local 5668. They began their strike on August 2 after the company presented its final offer.

Arrests were made the evening of August 9 because the driver of the truck in question was said to have been injured after the rock was thrown through the windshield. Although his condition has not been made public, police established “probable cause” to arrest Robert Mason Sullivan II, 49, of Evans, West Virginia, and Michael Robert Fowler, 43, of Mount Alto, for felony destruction of property.

Fowler was charged with a misdemeanor battery charge for allegedly throwing the rock that cracked the windshield and released on \$6,000 bond. Sullivan was released on \$5,000 bond.

The day after the two men were arrested for allegedly damaging the trucks, strikers reported company guards photographing, videotaping and harassing them.

As of this writing, neither the official web site for Local 5668 nor the United Steelworkers national web site out of Pittsburgh makes mention of the arrested strikers, or their fate. However, a report in the

Charleston Gazette cites Randy Moore, sub-district director for the United Steelworkers of America, as saying the alleged behavior “was not sanctioned by the union” and union workers planned to “work with the State Police to the fullest extent we can.”

This is a clear warning that the Steelworkers will not defend the arrested men and will leave them to the mercy of the government and the courts.

In fact, the local union web site advertised an event hosted by West Virginians United for Social and Economic Justice, which implored members to “Join us to Celebrate Social Security’s 77th Birthday,” and “Enjoy Birthday Cake with Special Guest [Democratic] Representative Nick J. Rahall, II Along with other local civic and labor leaders.” The gala, held in Huntington, West Virginia, also included, “a personal video message from Senator John D. Rockefeller, IV,” a Democrat.

This hobnobbing of the unions with West Virginia’s elite should not go unnoticed by strikers and their families. Especially since workers are being asked to sign up for unemployment benefits on August 21 in this same newsletter. It is unclear whether or not workers will receive adequate strike pay from the multi-million-dollar United Steelworkers strike fund.

The major issue for the Ravenswood aluminum workers, and the reason for the overwhelming strike vote (604 to 20), is their opposition to changes the company wants to make to health care coverage that will significantly increase costs to them and their families. The changes would wipe out most of the wage increase the company has proposed. Currently, workers

at Constellium make an average of about \$19 per hour. This amounts to some \$38,000 a year, before a third is taken out in taxes and “benefits.”

The company, along with the local media, has presented its proposed wage increase over the five years of the contract, \$23,000, as extremely generous. However, the proposed monthly health care contributions over the period would erase \$15,000, assuming that health care costs remain fixed. This is a net gain of \$8,000 or less.

Constellium, a transnational corporation, with operational headquarters in Paris, France, generated sales of €3.6 billion (US\$4.4 billion) in 2011. Constellium CEO Pierre Vareille is reported to earn \$3 million a year, or \$1,500 an hour.



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