

Tonawanda, New York: United Steelworkers forces regressive contract on 3M workers

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Workers at the 3M plant in Tonawanda, New York recently approved a new contract backed by the United Steelworkers union. The pact approves a two-tier wage system and the elimination of pensions for new hires.

The plant employs approximately 300 members of the United Steelworkers union and produces cellulose sponges. The plant also makes regular use of temporary workers hoping to obtain permanent status. According to 3M, it is the largest sponge-making facility in the world. In 2012 the company reported profits of over \$4 billion.

Under the newly introduced two-tier system, new hires at the Tonawanda plant will earn 80 percent of senior workers' pay for their first four years of employment while doing the same work. Newly hired workers, whose pensions will be terminated, will be forced to put their savings into a 401(k) savings plan that will be subject to the parasitic fees and whims of Wall Street.

Tonawanda is located just north of Buffalo, New York. Several major companies operate manufacturing facilities there, including 3M, DuPont, and Goodyear Dunlop. In neighboring Buffalo the official unemployment rate is 9.6 percent, but greatly exceeds that figure in many neighborhoods.

The official poverty rate in Buffalo, like that in the other major upstate New York cities of Rochester and Syracuse, regularly exceeds 30 percent. Buffalo is home to some of the poorest neighborhoods in the country. According to the National Center for Children Living in Poverty, 46.8 percent of Buffalo children live in poverty, ranking Buffalo third in the country in child poverty levels, behind only Detroit and Cleveland. Since 1980 Buffalo, once a major industrial city with job opportunities and higher wages, has shed approximately 100,000 residents. It is half the size it

was in 1960.

While major factories in nearby Tonawanda have continued to offer higher wages and benefits as other factories in the region have shuttered their doors, these plants have also turned Tonawanda into one of the most environmentally hazardous places to live in the state, for both workers and the general population. In 2009 the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation released an air-quality study showing elevated levels of the cancer-causing chemicals benzene and formaldehyde. The Tonawanda Coke plant in particular has long been cited by both local residents and the state as an especially egregious polluter.

In February of this year the state Department of Health reported that rates for leukemia, and lung, bladder, esophageal and uterine cancers exceeded levels found in the rest of the state. Bladder cancer rates were especially elevated, with a 24 percent higher rate for men and an astonishing 81 percent higher rate for women in the region. Preterm births and birth defects were also elevated compared with the rest of New York. The Department of Health, however, declined to specifically cite the excessive levels of benzene and formaldehyde from the factories as a cause for the increased cancer rates in the surrounding region.

Prior to the contract's ratification at the Tonawanda 3M plant, several workers were urging a "no" vote from union members, but were unable to overcome the organized campaign waged by the union for ratification. While the contract included a pay raise for current workers, a number of workers recognized this as a tactic by the union and the company to divert attention from real issues that would affect the long-term living standards of 3M workers.

One worker reported: "The contract was meant to divide workers and benefit the company. It is simple

divide and conquer. Sooner or later we are all going to be working like temps with no benefits and be forced to work whenever and for whatever the company says.”

Despite the union backing for the contract, many workers opposed the pact and were disenchanted with the union’s betrayal of current and potential future 3M workers. The frustration reached such a level that some workers suggested that company plants may have been present on the union’s official negotiation committee and colluded with the company in writing the terms of the contract.

Two-tier contracts have spread in recent years, most notably in the auto industry. The existing unions are incapable of challenging the corporate ruling elite, joining forces with big business to attack the living standards of workers while at the same time seeking to maintain their dues-paying base.



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