

# Novelis workers reject steelworkers union in upstate New York

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Six hundred workers at an aluminum processing plant in upstate New York voted not to join the United Steelworkers (USW) in a union certification vote last month. The defeat follows last month's debacle for the United Auto Workers, which lost at the Volkswagen plant in Chattanooga, Tennessee despite the backing of the German automaker.

Of the 560 workers voting, 273 voted to join the USW and 287 voted against. The February 21 and 22 vote was held at the Novelis sheet aluminum processing plant in Oswego, New York, a small city of about 18,000, located 40 miles north of Syracuse.

The vote underscored the deep alienation of workers towards the USW and other unions, which have collaborated in the destruction of jobs, living standards and working conditions in upstate New York and around the country.

The Novelis workers are well aware of the treacherous record of the USW. Hundreds of thousands of workers have lost their jobs in Buffalo, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Chicago, Gary and other steelmaking centers over the past four decades. Scores of companies have gone bankrupt, with workers and retirees losing their pensions and health benefits. During this time, the USW sought to pit American workers against their class brothers in Japan, Korea, Canada, Brazil and other countries to boost the profitability of the corporations.

In the auto parts industry, both the USW and the United Auto Workers have a long history of forcing through contracts that have cut wages, benefits and imposed speedup. This record has been particularly treacherous in upstate New York where UAW betrayals have left thousands of workers jobless at American Axle, Delphi and other auto component manufacturers.

According to company statements, Novelis—with a worldwide workforce of 11,000 employees—is one of

the world's top producers of rolled sheet aluminum and a major supplier for the auto industry. In addition to Oswego, the company operates three other plants in North America—in Terre Haute, Indiana; Logan, Kentucky; and Kingston, Ontario. The plants in Terre Haute and Kingston are organized by the USW while the Kentucky and New York plants are non-union.

The company has recently completed construction on a \$200 million expansion of its Oswego facility, adding new production lines and announcing the hiring of up to 100 new workers.

Novelis was spun off in 2007 from Alcan, one of the world's largest aluminum producers, which was purchased by Rio Tinto the same year for \$38 billion. Novelis was bought for \$6 billion by Aditya Birla Hindalco, an international conglomerate with headquarters in Mumbai, India.

Novelis and competitor Alcoa are reaping a windfall from the demand for lighter vehicles due to federal requirements for stricter fuel efficiency. Ford recently introduced one of the first aluminum-based vehicles, a 2015 F-150 pickup truck that weighs 700 pounds less than its mostly steel model. General Motors is planning an aluminum truck for 2018 and other automotive manufacturers are replacing steel parts with aluminum.

Last year, Novelis—whose profits jumped 126 percent to \$203 million—announced cuts to employee health care and overtime pay. In particular, the company plans to increase health care costs for all retirees at its non-union plants over the next two years and completely eliminate coverage in 2016.

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Despite this attack, the fact that the USW was not able to win an organizing vote indicates that workers have taken stock of the long record of its betrayals.

There is no lack of discontent in the area, but workers know the unions will do nothing to oppose their exploitation. Oswego, which sits on the shore of Lake Ontario, close to the Canadian border, has a poverty rate of over 25 percent according to the US Census Bureau. Unemployment in Oswego County is 8.2 percent according to the New York Department of Labor.

Following the defeat, the USW officials were quick to say they were filing an unfair labor practice charge with the National Labor Relations Board alleging interference by the company. The United Auto Workers did the same thing after its defeat at the Volkswagen plant. Meanwhile, various liberal and pseudo-left apologists for the UAW blamed the debacle on the supposed backwardness and “anti-union” culture of southern workers.

While these slanders were aimed at concealing the anti-working class character of the UAW, the defenders of the USW could not employ the same pretense in New York state, which has one of the longest histories of unionization in the US. With over 25 percent of its workforce in unions, the state has the highest unionization rate in the nation. The truth is that the vote expresses the recognition by workers that the unions do not represent their interests.

Any claim by the USW that cuts to retirees’ health benefits will not take place at the company’s unionized plants are false. The Kingston, Ontario plant is a case in point. There, the company carried out layoffs during the 2008 economic crisis and the USW pushed through a concessions-laden contract. In 2012, the USW pushed through another concessions deal by browbeating workers with threats that jobs would be moved to the Novelis Oswego facility if they resisted the company’s demands.

Workers need organization to unify their strength against the attack on jobs, pensions and health care. But this fight will not and cannot be carried out by organizations that are essentially company unions, tied to the corporations, the Democratic Party and the capitalist profit system they defend. Workers require new organizations, controlled by rank-and-file workers, and dedicated to defending the working class in opposition to the profit demands of the capitalist system. Above all, the defense of the social rights of the working class requires a new political strategy and

party to unite the international working class based on a socialist program, including the transformation of metal and auto-making into publicly owned industries, under the democratic control of workers.



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