

Locked out Allegheny Technology steelworkers determined to fight

Phyllis Scherrer
21 August 2015

The lockout of 2,200 steelworkers in six states by Allegheny Technologies Inc. (ATI), formerly Allegheny Ludlum Steel, has entered its sixth day. The specialty steel manufacturer in the US has brought in strikebreakers at 12 factories.

Half of the locked out steelworkers are from the Pittsburgh area, an area where most of the world's steel was produced from the mid-1800s until the 1980s and the headquarters of the United Steelworkers Union (USW).

The lockout takes place as 30,000 steelworkers at ArcelorMittal and US Steel face the expiration of their contracts on September 1. The steel companies are demanding that workers accept sweeping cuts in medical coverage and pensions, and accept a two-tier system that will provide inferior wages and benefits to newer workers.

Thousands of steelworkers are protesting today in nearby Braddock, Pennsylvania; in northwest Indiana; Detroit and Alabama, where US Steel has just announced the shutdown of a blast furnace and the layoff of 1,100 workers.

Workers on picket lines at the Vandergrift and Brackenridge plants in western Pennsylvania, recalled the bitter history of working class struggle, telling World Socialist Web Site reporters about the brutal August 26, 1919 murder of Fannie Sellins, a United Mine Workers (UMWA) organizer from St. Louis who came to organize miners in the Alle-Kiski Valley, where the ATI mills are located today.

Company thugs gunned down Sellins outside the Allegheny Coal and Coke company mine in Brackenridge after she intervened on behalf of a worker who was being beaten. She was known for this type of heroism, as well as for uniting workers across language and cultural barriers into the union, particularly black

workers sent from the south as strikebreakers.

The recollection of such history is significant as workers in the United States re-enter the class struggle and the spirit of resistance reasserts itself. Workers on the picket line voiced a strong desire to unite with other sections of workers who are facing contract struggles, including steelworkers, autoworkers and Verizon workers.

Rather than uniting these struggles however, the United Steelworkers, the UAW and other unions have kept each section of workers isolated and are negotiating yet more sellout deals behind the backs of workers. Allied with the Obama administration and the Democratic Party, the unions are committed to the White House's policy of slashing wages and shifting the burden of health and pension benefits onto the backs of workers.

Many workers on the picket line noted that ATI Vice President Bob Wetherbee had been at Alcoa Aluminum for decades and had overseen a brutal attack on the jobs and living standards of workers there before being hired to do the same thing at ATI. The fact is, however, that USW President Leo Gerard sits on Obama's corporate competitiveness board, the Advanced Manufacturing Partnership Steering Committee, with the current Alcoa CEO Klaus Kleinfeld.

Gene, one of the locked out workers, told the WSWS, "I have worked for ATI for ten years. In 2004, the company got the union to renegotiate the agreement mid-contract. The local wasn't even involved in the decision. I've been USW since the start of my career about thirty years ago. The dues have shot up for the supposed protection of the union. Of course, if they want you gone—you're gone."

In the 1994 strike, Gene said, there was community support. "This area is 85 percent steelworkers,

including retirees,” he concluded.

There is overwhelming support for the locked out workers at ATI in the small mill towns in the Allegheny Valley. Another picketer explained that 500 signs made by the union had been quickly distributed and put on lawns and in windows all over the area.

The WSWs spoke to Sarah Ritchie a health care worker who lives in Brackenridge. She said, “I think what the company is asking for is pretty bad. To be cutting benefits and pensions is wrong. I don't even see how it is legal to eliminate overtime after 40 hours. They also don't want to guarantee them a full workweek. That is crazy. How can you work without knowing what you are going to make? I hope the workers can stick to their guns and stop this.”

She added, “This is a trend all over. Other companies are expecting more and more from their employees and paying less. I feel stuck where I am. I would like a better job, but there is nothing out there. I've thought about going back to school, but a lot of my friends who went to college are in the same position I am except they have lot of debt. I am worried about my daughter. What are things going to be like for her when she grows up?”

Steven Schubert works for a cleaning company and is supporting the workers. “These companies just want people to work harder and pay less. This is the American way, make more money and not care about the people.

“Look, I just went on their web site and the first thing they say is that they made \$4.3 billion last year and they only have 10,000 workers. So if you make all that, you mean you can't spare some of it so the workers can have health care? The big companies get away with it, they have the money and they are just pushing everyone down.”



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact