

US steelworkers union blocks fight against wage and benefit cuts

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31 August 2015

With the three-year labor agreements for 30,000 steelworkers in the United States set to expire Tuesday at midnight, the United Steelworkers (USW) union has ordered workers to remain on the job after the deadline passes. The action comes as the union is working with US Steel and ArcelorMittal to prepare a major assault on the jobs, wages and benefits of workers.

ArcelorMittal, the world's largest steelmaker, wants its 13,000 workers to accept a three-year pay freeze along with a reduction in incentive payments, vacation pay and sickness and accident benefits. US Steel is demanding that its 17,000 active workers and the hundreds of thousands of retirees and their spouses pay more health care costs. It also wants to reduce vacation pay along with further attacks on health and safety conditions.

The USW is working with the companies and the Obama administration in the effort to block any opposition to these demands from workers. The USW is closely allied with the Democratic Party, and union president Leo Gerard sits on President Obama's corporate competitiveness board. The unions have helped Obama force a de facto freeze in real wages and shift the cost of health care and pensions onto the backs of workers.

In a curt message posted on the USW web site, union executives said, "Although we are far apart on a variety of economic and non-economic issues, we are encouraged by the overall direction of our most recent discussions...With our Sept. 1 contract expiration approaching, our committee has chosen to remain at the table and continue to negotiate rather than return to our plants to seek strike authorization from the membership. As long as we are engaged with management, we ask all USW members to continue reporting for work as scheduled."

US Steel expressed its gratitude to their USW "partners," with a spokeswoman saying, "We appreciate the United Steelworkers' commitment in their U.S. Steel

2015 Bargaining Update on Aug. 26 to 'keep talking and keep working' for as long as it takes to reach a fair agreement."

The first impact of this announcement is the continued isolation of 2,200 steelworkers who have been locked out for two weeks by Pittsburgh-based Allegheny Technologies, Inc. The specialty steelmaker, which has brought in strikebreakers and security forces to continue its operations, is acting as the stalking horse for the entire industry by demanding sharp increases in out-of-pocket health care costs and changes in scheduling that would essentially transform the workforce into casual laborers.

The corporations are clearly coordinating their class-war measures. Within days of the ATI lockout, US Steel, also based in Pittsburgh, announced it was permanently shutting its blast furnace at its Fairfield Works near Birmingham, Alabama, wiping out 1,100 jobs. ArcelorMittal has also threatened to shut one of its six remaining hot strip mills. Both companies are using the threat of mass unemployment to terrorize workers into submission.

By ordering its members to stay on the job, the USW is aiding the corporations in stockpiling steel to fill orders in the event of a long lockout or strike. With steel prices plummeting due to the world economic crisis, the corporations may well be preparing such a provocation.

With tens of millions of workers chafing over the longest period of wage stagnation since the Great Depression, the USW and the AFL-CIO are determined to prevent the outbreak of any struggle that could spark a broader movement of the working class against the corporations, the government and the pro-company unions themselves.

Even if the USW did call a strike, it would be only for the purpose of wearing workers down, isolating them from other sections of the working class and imposing another pro-company contract. This was precisely the

experience of the oil refinery workers earlier this year. The USW called out less than a quarter of the 30,000 USW-organized workers, isolated one embattled local at a time, withheld strike pay and then rammed through a sellout dictated by the oil companies and the Obama administration.

In comments yesterday to the *World Socialist Web Site*, a veteran ExxonMobil worker in Beaumont, Texas warned workers about the role of the unions. “I used to be a strong union person, but I was betrayed by the USW. It started when they called out only a fraction of the workers and then left each section of striking workers out to dry. After that ExxonMobil gave us a ‘take it or leave it’ local contract because they knew we were on our own and the union would not give us support if we went on strike.

“It’s going to have to be all sectors of the labor force that come out together and shut this country down,” he added. “I look at my grandkids and I say they are not going to have a chance. They are going to be making \$10 an hour, 20 years from now, unless we do something. We’re not going to get any support from the politicians, and the unions won’t support us. It’s going to take a unified struggle of steelworkers, teachers, transit workers, autoworkers—all of us.”

On the picket lines in Brackenridge, Pennsylvania, where a locked out worker was struck by truck hauling strikebreakers on Friday, ATI workers called for unified strike action. “We not only need a national strike by steelworkers,” one worker told the WSWS. “Everyone in the United States should go out and we’ll see how long they would last.”

There is a growing mood of opposition among different sections of workers throughout the country. Not only are the contracts expiring for steelworkers as well as USW-organized taconite miners in Minnesota and Michigan, but on September 14 the agreements covering 140,000 autoworkers at General Motors, Ford and Fiat Chrysler also run out. GM workers last week voted nearly unanimously to strike, following similar votes by Fiat Chrysler workers.

On October 1, contracts will also expire for 11,200 workers at John Deere & Co., the world’s largest agricultural equipment manufacturers. Labor agreements have already expired for 300,000 US Postal workers, 60,000 Verizon and AT&T telecom workers, and tens of thousands of teachers in Chicago, Detroit, Pittsburgh and other cities. In each of these cases, the unions have extended contracts even as the employers have gone on the offensive.

The renewed offensive of the corporate and financial elite comes amidst signs of an intensifying crisis of the world capitalist system. Early last week, stock markets fell more sharply than at any time since the crisis of 2008, with a rally organized only through the intervention of Federal Reserve officials who promised a new infusion of cash to boost share values. For eight years, the Obama administration and governments internationally have sought to maintain and expand the wealth of the financial aristocracy through such measures.

As the stock market bubbles begin to unravel, the ruling class is responding by intensifying its assault on the jobs, wages and benefits of the working class. This only underscores the fact that workers confront not simply a battle against this or that company, but against an entire economic system.

The unions are the chief obstacles to a fight against the dictates of the ruling class. This treachery arises not simply from the corruption and cowardice of Gerard & Co., but from the pro-capitalist and nationalist orientation of the unions and their political subordination of the working class to the Democratic Party and the profit system. If the struggles of the working class are going to be united, nationally and internationally, the conduct of this fight must be taken out of the hands of the USW, the United Auto Workers and the other unions.

New organizations of struggle, democratically controlled by workers and free from the authority of the unions, must be built. Above all the working class must be armed with an entirely different political strategy based on an international socialist program.



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