”You get hired here and they pretty much own your soul”

Locked out Allegheny Technologies workers speak out

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The lockout of 2,200 workers at Allegheny Technologies Inc. (ATI) at twelve mills in six states is nearing the end of its fourth week. ATI locked out the workers on August 15 after the United Steelworkers (USW) union ordered its members to continue to work past the June 30 contract deadline, and offered the company millions in concessions.

ATI is demanding steep increases in out-of-pocket health care expenses and the elimination of employer-paid pensions for new hires, creating a two-tier wage and benefit system. In addition, ATI wants to vastly expand the use of outside contractors, and impose work rule changes that would essentially turn workers into casual laborers.

ATI has brought in scabs hired from Strom Engineering to continue operations during the lockout. On August 28, James Dietz, 61, of Springdale was struck by a van carrying strikebreakers while he was picketing the ATI hot strip mill in Brackenridge, Pennsylvania. Rather than arresting the driver, police issued a citation to Dietz for “intentionally and recklessly” obstructing a public passage, placing “himself and others in danger of bodily injury.”

ATI was the first of three steelmakers whose contracts expired this summer. It is clear the much larger firms, US Steel and ArcelorMittal, are coordinating their assault on workers with ATI. Despite this, USW has isolated ATI workers by blocking a strike by 30,000 workers at US Steel and ArcelorMittal who face similar concessionary demands.

The contracts covering these workers expired September 1 but the USW signed a “continue to work agreement” that forced them to remain on the job without a contract. This has left workers vulnerable to arbitration victimizations by management and has allowed the companies to stockpile steel in preparation for a long lockout or strike. Local media reports in northwest Indiana—where some 10,000 steelworkers are located—say Strom Engineering is already taken applications for replacements.

On Thursday, the USW issued a statement that US Steel has not backed down from its demands for sweeping cuts in health care, which could add thousands of dollars each year in co-pays and premiums for current workers and even more for new hires. In other words, the craven capitulation of the USW has only emboldened the steel giants and made them more intransigent.

Last week, the USW requested a meeting with ATI executives and a federal mediator for today, September 11. The USW website indicates ATI will attend although company officials have not publicly acknowledged this. They too have shown no signs of backing down on their concession demands, and given the sabotage of the struggle by the USW, have no reason to.

One of ATI's larger mills, employing hundreds of workers, is in Vandergrift, Pennsylvania. Located about 35 miles east of Pittsburgh, the borough of Vandergrift has a population of just over 5,000, down from nearly 11,500 in 1930. The median household income is $32,900 compared to the state average of $52,500. Nearly 17 percent of the population lives below the poverty level.

Although the official local unemployment rate is 5.8 percent, less than half (48.4 percent) of working age population is in the labor force, significantly below the national average of 62.6 percent, which is already the lowest since 1977. This suggests that a significant fraction of the area’s workers has given up on the prospect of a decent-paying job and withdrawn from the labor force.

Vandergrift and neighboring Apollo and Leechburg are some of the several towns along the Kiskiminetas River,

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which make up what is locally called the Kiski Valley. The Kiskiminetas flows into the Allegheny River and divides Westmoreland from Armstrong counties.

The area has a long history of coal mining and steel manufacturing. Most of the coal mines were closed by the 1990s as part of the massive deindustrialization of the entire Pittsburgh region that put hundreds of thousands of workers out of work. Many were forced to leave the region in search of work. ATI, formerly, Allegheny Ludlum, is one of the few manufacturers that remained, although with a vastly reduced work force.

Ralph Johnson, Carl Decker and Randy Wyant, workers at ATI Vandergrift with 24, 21, and 34 years respectively, spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site*. All three strongly agreed with the perspective of uniting steel, auto, telecom and other workers in the US and internationally.

Ralph said, “I make grain-oriented electrical steel for (electric) transformers. I reduce down the gauge, take it from thick to thin. I work on a multi-million dollar piece of equipment. I'm into finishing, where it's precise work to put your rolls in, your backups, and put that steel through that mill. We put almost a million pounds a day through that mill. I've been here 24 years. I hope I can get at least 10 more in. But, we'll do what we've got to do.”

The three spoke of the dangers in the mill. “Steel is not forgiving,” Ralph said. “In the furnaces, with all the gases, if you don't know what you're doing there, you can blow the plant up. You want to bring people in that say they know how to do this?

“One small move in there and you could have a devastating accident. You’re going to leave and you might not have a hand, might not have an arm, let alone your life.”

Carl added, “This is just a concern people have beyond yelling that they're scabs. Yeah, we're pissed that they're going in there but I worry about those people. I don't want to see another human being get killed, for no reason. The company's not what made the safety in the plant, it's the union workers. We wanted the safer working conditions.

“My father and others in the '60s and '70s fought real hard to make the unions what they are, and the benefits we have now. It's a shame that they keep picking away at something my dad and my uncles and everybody built, and people died for.”

Ralph continued, “People died fighting for better conditions. They want to try to take us back to those days. Let them try to live on ten bucks an hour. In today's economy, there's no way you can do it and live a good, peaceful life. So, you have to work all this crazy overtime, and you have no quality of life. The executives can do what they want, the golf dates and picnics. I can't even cut my grass most of the time because of the way they want to work us. It’s 10-12 hour days, six days a week, sometimes seven.”

“[ATI CEO Richard] Harshman got, what, a 70 percent raise? He's making $447 an hour and he's telling me that I'm not worth 25 bucks and hour. So what makes you worth that much and I'm not worth $25 an hour when you're making your $447 an hour off my back?”

Carl added, “They hired the CEO of the Pittsburgh Penguins to put him on the board. Why did you need another board member? You already had ten? Those guys get paid that kind of money.”

Carl, Ralph, and Randy spoke of the inhuman scheduling and overtime practices at ATI, worsened through high levels of attrition without replacement from more experienced workers.

“When they were putting in that new hot mill in Brackenridge, those guys were all seven days a week,” Carl said. “And now they get locked out. This is what they get for all the hard work they put in to get it in and online on time?”

“When you get a guy retire they don't want to hire anybody,” Ralph said. “They split it up and you have to work four extra hours to fill in for the man that left. That's not right.

Randy added, “My kids are all grown up and gone. We had birthday parties and stuff, but I'll guarantee you, a lot of time I wasn't there on their birthday. And if dad was there, he was staying up after he worked 8 hours here. You're going out to a school function at 7 o'clock at night and then going to work at midnight. You get hired here and they pretty much own your soul.”

Randy said ATI views its losses during the lockout as an investment toward lower production costs in the future. “They stand here, they look out and say 'this may cost us this much in the short term, but if these guys cave in, we'll make it up in five years, or four years.' That's their theory, and then if the market's a little slow now, that's more power to them.”

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