

Locked out Allegheny Technologies steelworkers speak about working conditions

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The WSWS recently spoke to John Wilkinson, a locked-out steelworker who worked at Allegheny Technologies' New Castle, Indiana mill for 13 years before it closed and he transferred to the ATI mill in Vandergrift, Pennsylvania.

Six years ago, after ATI closed the New Castle facility, some of the 127 workers at the mill were able to transfer to other plants operated by the company.

This has become a common experience for workers in many different industries, where during downsizing, mergers and reorganizations, companies shut plants and worksites in one location and shift work to other facilities, upending the lives of workers and their families.

The closure of the ATI facility as well as a Metaldyne auto parts plant in 2009 continues to have a negative impact on New Castle, which is located 50 miles east of Indianapolis. One quarter of the city's 17,600 residents live in poverty while a staggering 47 percent of children under five years old are officially impoverished.

The official unemployment rate is 9.2 percent, significantly higher than the state average of 6.4 percent. Less than 56 percent of the working age population is in the labor force, meaning a very large number of people have given up looking for work.

"I don't know exactly how many transferred here, but there is a group of us," Wilkinson said. "Other people had to transfer to other plants throughout the country. I had to move away from everyone I knew, friends and family. I have three sons and a stepdaughter, the youngest is 28. I don't get to see them as often as I would like."

"I am one of the lucky ones, my kids were older. There are a lot of guys who couldn't move and they are in worse shape than I am," he said. "There is nothing in

Indiana. I am 57 and there are not a lot of places that are going to hire someone my age. I had to come here; I am too young to retire. You get to my age you have to take whatever job you can get."

John, another Vandergrift mill worker who worked 13 years in New Castle, also spoke to the WSWS about his experiences with the transfer.

"I need to work about six more years so I can retire," he said. "That would give me 25 years at ATI. I wouldn't get the full pension, but I want to be able to live my life a little. Before I started with ATI, I had worked 19 years at another company."

"Insurance is a big part of this for me. It is not everything, but it is a big part. Insurance costs a lot and when you have been working as long as me you need it. The company also doesn't want to give us a 40-hour week and they want to hire people off the street and pay them less and they will be nonunion.

"When you get a nonunion worker making less and working side by side of me, what is going to happen to my job?" John asked. "They want me to train him, but then they will want to put me out the door."

Speaking against the claim that workers are overpaid, he said, "When the company publishes how much money they say we make, they don't tell you how many hours we have to work. We work a year and a half in one year!"

He explained further, "I earn \$25 an hour plus any incentives and we never know what that is going to be. My last pay was for 140 hours. I worked 60 hours the first week and 80 hours the second week. I don't have a social life. All I do is work and sleep."

John made clear that such long hours are especially hard on workers' family lives: "It wasn't the move here that caused my divorce. But it was ATI. You work weekends, holidays whenever they need you. I don't

know the exact figures, but most of the guys I work with are all divorced and it is all because of ATI.”

When John moved to Pennsylvania he rented a house with two other workers that had also moved. “We never saw each other. With working different shifts and putting in overtime, even though I am living with two other people, I never saw them. You can imagine what that would do to a family.”

He concluded, “I think they are trying to make an example out of us. The companies are making all this money but they don’t want the workers to share in it.”



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