

Locked out Allegheny Technologies steelworkers continue fight

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The lockout of 2,200 steelworkers at Allegheny Technologies Inc. (ATI) at 12 mills in six states has entered its sixth week. ATI locked out workers on August 14 after rebuffing offers by the United Steelworkers (USW) union to hand over tens of millions of dollars in concessions, and after the USW ordered its members to continue to work past the June 30 contract deadline.

The locked-out workers are being deliberately isolated by the USW, which has ordered 30,000 workers at US Steel and ArcelorMittal to continue working without contracts after they expired on September 1.

In addition, 450 steelworkers at Sherwin Alumina in Gregory, Texas remain locked out after more than 11 months. This past week the USW offered more concessions to the aluminum producer, which rejected them because it is seeking even deeper cuts. While Sherwin Alumina has continued to operate the plant with scab labor, the USW has also left these workers completely isolated, holding only a few meaningless “solidarity” publicity stunts.

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 benefits system. ATI wants to impose work rule changes that would essentially turn workers into casual laborers. In addition, ATI wants to vastly expand the use of outside contractors as a lower paid tier of workers that they can exploit even more ruthlessly than full-time employees.

Josh Fennell, a steelworker at ATI Vandergrift with seven years, noted the financial hardships imposed by an extended, isolated lockout. “It could go either way. It all depends on where people are financially. My wife works. We’re going to be all right, the bills are going

be paid. We’re not going to do much else. Now, people we work with, some of them are the only source of income.”

Josh noted that he was forced into excessive overtime leading up the lockout. “I did five or six hundred hours of overtime last year. Actually, I just looked at our last paycheck, and I’m already at 300 this year. Before we got locked out, I was on 12-hour shifts. My last three weeks of work I was 76 hours, 72 hours, 78 hours.”

Workers report that, thanks in large part to their forced overtime, ATI has stockpiled enough steel to last for months.

Josh spoke of his opposition to ATI’s concession demands. “The health care obviously is big, but all the news outlets are reporting that it’s health care and health care only. It’s far from that. I think a lot of the media is bought by the company. No doubt in my mind. You see a lot of media that way, they side with the company.”

Josh strenuously opposed lower pay and benefits for new hires, saying it would create a split between new and current workers. “They want to take away pensions from new hires and reduce them to strictly 401(k)s that they can keep when they leave the company. What’s their incentive to actually stay? I have seven years in. I don’t want to leave now because in 23 I can retire.

“What’s to say this [lockout] doesn’t happen three or four contracts from now, and a worker says, ‘I’ve got nothing to lose, I’ll see you later.’ Then we’re going to have less people fighting for their rights. On top of that if workers are divided new hires can say, ‘Well, you didn’t care about us.’ It’s not like that, however, a lot of us do care about the younger workers.”

When asked if ATI is bringing Strom Engineering scabs into the Vandergrift mill, Josh responded, “Yes they are, a white van just left. There’s seven vans a

day, seven a shift. They're not all full. Usually one of them is full and the others have two or three each."

Asked what he thought of a united struggle of steel, auto and communication workers, Josh responded, "Overall, I think this is the time where everybody needs to, for lack of a better term, fight the system. This is the chance, because we're all up right now. It couldn't have been a more opportune time to really go against the corporate greed of America."

Kathy Vargo, the wife of a recently retired steelworker who joined the picket line, said, "I come here to show my support any time I can. My great grandmother marched with Fannie Sellins (a mineworkers organizer) who was murdered in 1919 near the plant gate in Brackenridge. There was a coal mine and the miners were on strike. Basically she was working to keep the Polish and Slovak women and families together with food and clothing so the men could strike. My great grandmother had come here to work in the mines too. She went to the gate and applied for the job by saying, 'Big hands, strong as a bull.' There she became active in the union."

Speaking on conditions at the Vandergrift mill, Kathy explained, "Luckily my children are older, but for the last 15 years there has been no such thing as the eight hour day. The company was always forcing them to work overtime. You couldn't plan a birthday party or go to a school function because you didn't know if he would be home or not. I really feel for the young families because you can't have any kind of family life.

"The company wants to go back to day labor, when they just hired you when they needed you. That was what my great grandmother was fighting against and we can't go back to that."

Janice, with 10 years at the mill, said, "I have one of the longest commutes of my coworkers. I am from the Mon Valley. I have been in manufacturing my whole life. When I graduated from high school in 1977, you could do whatever you wanted to do. If you wanted to be a steelworker, you could be a steelworker. If you wanted to be a coal miner, you could be a coal miner. If you wanted to be an autoworker, you could be an autoworker. The future was open.

"That is all gone. The steel mills are all gone, construction is all gone. Anything that paid a good wage is gone. There are no jobs here. When I go home it is so sad that everything is boarded up. I am 56, I am

a grandmother and I am concerned with the future of my grandchildren."



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