

Lockout of 2,200 steelworkers in US enters 12th week

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The lockout of 2,200 steelworkers at Allegheny Technologies Inc. (ATI) has entered its 12th week and has now become longer than the 69-day strike against the company in 1994. ATI is demanding massive concessions, including cuts to health care that would increase copays and deductibles to over \$10,000 per year for families.

The company is also demanding the elimination of employer-paid pensions and health care for new hires when they retire. On November 30, locked-out workers and their families will lose their health insurance.

The company also wants to impose work rule changes that would allow the company to set daily schedules and work hours with little or no notice—essentially turning workers into casual laborers. It is seeking to convert up to 40 percent of its workforce into outside contractors, another form of highly insecure casual labor.

ATI began locking out its workforce at 13 facilities in six states on August 14, just days after presenting its “last, best, and final” contract offer. ATI has hired a small army of private security guards and the strikebreaking firm Strom Engineering to staff the mills with scabs. ATI is claiming that it is restoring some production at its mills.

Four-hundred-fifty steelworkers have now been locked out for over a year at the Sherwin Alumina mill in Gregory, Texas, where the company has also made massive concession demands.

The United Steelworkers (USW), which represents the workers, has been continuing its policy of isolating the workers.

Thirty thousand steelworkers at US Steel and ArcelorMittal continue to work after their contract expired September 1, despite the companies making massive concessions demands.

Steelworkers on the picket lines at ATI mill in Vandergrift and Leechburg, Pennsylvania spoke to the WSWWS about the issues in the lockout.

Derek Winship, with 19 years, said, “The end result is they want to break the union. In March, they presented us with a list of 144 items they wanted. They are all important. I understand needing to pay some of the health care, but what they want is ridiculous. First you would have to pay \$250 a month and then there is a \$6,000 deductible. That is \$9,000 out of pocket before anything kicks in. That’s for a family. For an individual it is a \$3,000 deductible, so it is \$6,000 before anything kicks in.”

“Plus they want a lot of other concessions. They want to change the bonuses that will cut our pay. The public has not got a clue, all the propaganda is coming from the company. The corporate media is on the side of the company.

“The company wants to be able to dictate everything. They want full control. Say they want to bring in some contractors, they don’t want the union to be able to say anything about it.

“The company wants to cut the pension for the new guys. They want to take away their defined benefits and just give them a 401(k). That is a big deal. Everyone needs a pension. If we agree to allowing the company to do that, then who is to say in 10 years that when another contract is up, the younger guys won’t say, ‘Let’s cut the retirees, they were willing to cut us.’”

Derek, like a group of workers at the Vandergrift and Leechburg mills, had transferred from ATI’s mill in New Castle, Indiana when that mill was closed down about six years ago. “We moved 400 miles so that I could keep working. I need another 10 years to get my pension,” he said.

“I moved here with my son and girlfriend. I have two

children back in Indiana with my ex-wife. It wasn't the move that broke up our marriage, but when you are working 12-hour days it doesn't leave much time for family life.

"This is union-busting through and through. This will go from company to company. The wealthy just want to be making more money and they don't care about the people. What is enough for these people? When you make \$34,000 a day, what else can you need?"

Jack Cockroft, a retired crane operator with 32 and a half years at ATI, denounced the company's attacks on overtime pay: "Working over eight hours, they want to pay you straight time," he said. "That's not right. When I was working, it was anything over eight hours.

"I'm backing these boys. I'm retired from here. They're fighting for retirees plus themselves. I keep an eye on their wood stock and cut firewood."

Since retiring, Jack's health care costs have shot up: "When I retired, I should've gotten full health care, no deductions, no nothing. Then I started getting this stuff out of my check. I've been out nine years, this happened about eight years ago. I've been paying \$300 a month for two people. That's a good chunk of change. I get a little over \$1,000 a month from my pension.

"The last 128 days I worked, I worked straight through. I didn't take a day off, because your retirement's based on the highest quarter you make. So that's what I did. I just pounded myself into the ground. Working doubles, get off at eight in the morning, get back at four in the afternoon. Work four to midnight, or four to eight in the morning the next morning, just doing that through to retirement. My wife just asked me, 'Tell me why we're doing this,' and I'd explain it to her, and she'd say, 'Well, let me know when to pack a lunch, and how much.'"

Jack spoke of the dangers introduced by ATI's attempts to run the mills with scab labor: "I hear they have people getting hurt. I heard somebody got hurt in Brackenridge. They went to the dispensary to get fixed up, and the company told the nurse, 'Do not make any paper work out of that.'" Well it's her job, she has to, so she made the paperwork out, and she got fired.

"She has to make that report out. Has to. It's the law."

Jack pointed to a chemical tank in the Vandergrift plant: "This tank over here. It fell and spilled

something into the river. The people across the river saw it, and called 911. That's the stuff they run the mills with."

The chemical spill in the Kiskiminitas River was reported to local environmental authorities on October 1. There has been no news since.

A utility tech with five and a half years at ATI Vandergrift spoke of the effects of ATI's work scheduling on family life: "I lost my family and everything coming out here. They couldn't handle the scheduling. You can make a lot of money if you're living here. That's why I'm working here, to give a life to my kids."



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