

US: Lockout of 2,200 steelworkers enters fourth month

Evan Winters
20 November 2015

As the lockout of 2,200 workers at Allegheny Technologies Inc. (ATI) enters its fourth month, it is becoming increasingly clear to workers that the United Steelworkers Union (USW) is isolating and betraying their struggle.

ATI began locking its workforce out on August 14th, several days after putting forward a contract deemed its “last, best, and final offer.” ATI is demanding steep increases in out-of-pocket healthcare payments, which can amount to over \$10,000 a year per family, factoring in deductibles, prescription drug costs and other expenditures. In addition, ATI is calling for massive cuts to benefits for new hires, including the replacement of pensions with 401(k) plans.

The company also aims to transform its workforce into casual labor, demanding the ability to contract out 40 percent of all jobs. Proposed new scheduling rules would essentially eliminate time-and-a-half overtime pay after eight hours of work, while placing workers’ schedules at the day-to-day discretion of employers.

From day one, ATI made it clear that it is willing to accept losses now as a down payment on a cheaper workforce in the future. As it began the lockout, ATI mobilized what it termed a “D-Day” deployment headed by Strom Engineering that recruited scabs, flanked by a small army of private security guards. ATI claims it has largely restored production at many of its mills, although workers are generally skeptical of these claims.

In a recent article, an ATI representative claimed that the company could now operate its new \$1.2bn hot strip mill with only 32 workers, as opposed to the hundreds required in its predecessor. Although this number does not include maintenance and non-production work, it demonstrates that ATI only needs to train a relatively small number of skilled workers to restore production.

In response to ATI’s aggressive mobilization, the USW has worked tirelessly to isolate, demoralize, and betray

locked out ATI workers. The USW aims to demonstrate that it can be relied upon to boost the industry’s profits by slashing labor costs.

Locked out workers currently receive about \$500 per week in unemployment benefits, and about \$100 per week in strike pay. Unemployment benefits are set to run out in February. Workers report that the USW is considering cutting their strike pay even as the holiday season approaches.

Locked out workers are bracing for the loss of their healthcare coverage on November 30. Workers who want to maintain similar health coverage will be forced to pay for COBRA insurance, which can cost \$1,800 a month for a family of three, almost an entire month’s unemployment benefit. An alternative “major medical” plan, available through the USW, covers only emergency care, leaving workers to pay out of pocket for regular doctor visits and prescription medication.

Meanwhile, the USW has ordered 30,000 US Steel and ArcelorMittal workers to continue working even though their contract expired on September 1. The USW is using its betrayal of the ATI lockout as a warning to blackmail US Steel and ArcelorMittal workers into accepting deep concessions.

The WSWS recently spoke with picketing steelworkers and supporters at the ATI Bagdad plant in Leechburg, PA.

Bill Kistler, a retired Pittsburgh bus driver, was at the Bagdad picket line to deliver food and show his support. “I’ve been retired 14 years from the Port Authority [of Allegheny County], on full benefits. But, I haven’t gotten a raise on my pension in years.

“I had to take another job. Just to keep things going. I’m driving a bus now. I do weddings, casino trips, stuff like that. It’s not a full-time job. I’ve been busy this month, seven days a week. I’m tired! I’m old. I can’t do this anymore.”

Randy Dunmore, a worker at ATI Bagdad with 38

years' experience, explained what is at stake in the lockout. "They want to contract out all maintenance. They also want us to pay up to \$30,000 out of pocket over the life of the contract. We have no problem paying \$215 a month out of pocket, but the deductibles and copays, that's outrageous. It can be over \$10,000 a year.

"They're trying to force a lot of the older people like myself to retire, and the younger guys are saying 'I've got to have this job to pay for my house.'

"Right now if they put it up to a vote with us older people, it probably wouldn't fly. A few months down the road, there's a better chance it will."

Speaking of the concessions, Dunmore continued "There are people that died for that years ago. They actually gave their lives. Are we just going to put our hands up and give it up, what their predecessors all fought for? It was more than just strikes, there was blood."

John Rainelli expressed his outrage over the lock out. "I've worked here almost 43 years. I put my heart and soul into this company for 43 years and this is how they pay you back. For all these years they would say things like, 'you are the ones that made this company' and 'if it wasn't for you we wouldn't be here.' But then they just threw us out.

"I ran the overhead crane. It used to be a good place to work, but for the last two or three years I wouldn't recommend it to anyone.

"Obama is not a person for the workers. He has not helped the working class," Rainelli remarked when asked about the role of the Democratic president and other politicians in attacking workers.

"All the local politicians cut deals so that ATI could build that plant in Brackenridge. They got tax breaks and all kinds of help. Now they just throw everyone out of work and the politicians don't say anything.

"The whole thing is wrong. If this isn't settled, I will have to retire on Dec 31. I don't want to but I will have to. Our medical runs out on November 30 and the COBRA costs too much. The union has a plan but I call it the 'oh shit' plan. It will cover you if you break your arm and go to the emergency room, but it won't cover doctor visits and prescriptions.

"I'm in good health, but I need to see the doctor and I take medication for maintenance and the doctors need to check that. That won't be covered by the union.

"There are many guys who are going to retire because of that. The ones that don't have 30 years are stuck. They are the ones that are going to be hurting. The company wants to be able to schedule you 32 or 30 hours a week.

All of a sudden they will say you are not full time and you don't get health insurance."

Rainelli went on to denounce the isolation of the locked out workers by the USW and other unions. "We are on a little island over here, and USX (US Steel) and the rest of them are over there, and we've been separated from them. And that pisses me off. The biggest thing that pisses me off is that we've got other unions coming across this picket line. Boilermakers, Siemens, all these union workers are going across here, and they tell us 'We have to go across, because if we don't, we're gonna lose our jobs.' What the hell?

"What really burns a few of us up, if you go down to the Labor Day march, those are the guys marching beside you with the sign saying 'Solidarity,' meanwhile they're going inside to take our jobs. How do you like that for a kick in the nuts?

"And it's bad enough that USX and the rest of them, there are so many of them, they're still working. And here we are, with about 2000 of us. It's probably down by now. Out here for what?! Are we going to be martyrs? Are they gonna crucify us? We're the sacrificial lambs."

He concluded by pointing to the lessons of the 1981 PATCO air traffic controllers strike and the long string of union betrayals since then, "You're right about getting everybody together, I've said that all along. This all started back when Reagan fired all the air traffic controllers. Every union in this country, I said back then, should have stood up and said 'That's it, we're shutting this country down.' We should have shut this country down, and gotten behind them.

"We've given up a lot over all these years. We've given up a hell of a lot. Back in the '84 contract, we gave up a week's vacation. We gave up time and half on Sunday for a while, it was time and a quarter, just to build them a line that they said would never go off of four crews, and it wasn't long before it went down to one, and then they finally scrapped it. They lied to us."



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact