

US: 2,200 locked-out steelworkers lose health care

Samuel Davidson
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On Tuesday, 2,200 steelworkers who have been locked out of their jobs since August 14 had their health insurance eliminated by Allegheny Technologies Inc. (ATI).

“My wife goes in for an MRI on Monday,” said a steelworker on the picket line in Brackenridge, Pennsylvania, on Sunday. “I don’t know what to expect or what will happen,” he said.

For workers to continue with their health insurance they will have to pay the full premiums, which range from \$800 a month for individual coverage to as much as \$1,800 a month for family coverage, an amount they cannot afford.

“I had to find another job,” said Dave (pictured right), who had worked nearly eight years at ATI’s Brackenridge mill and is now locked out. “It doesn’t pay as much, and there are no paid holidays or time off, but at least I do get health insurance.

“By the end of February, the unemployment runs out and you are going to have 2,200 people without any benefits at all.

“I don’t understand why they are doing this. We were willing to work; it is the company that has locked us out.

“I don’t have kids at home. It is really hurting the guys that have a family to support and take care of. I don’t know what people are going to do. You have to have health insurance when you have kids. It is a waiting game.”

Workers who don’t continue coverage through the company’s plan will be forced to buy insurance elsewhere or face being fined under the Obama administration’s misnamed Affordable Care Act.

Picketing alongside Dave was another steelworker, also named Dave (pictured left), who has worked for ATI nearly 10 years. He said that he is able to get

health insurance from his previous job, where he had been a coal miner for 20 years until the mine where he worked shut down.

“I would just like to know what we did that was so wrong to deserve this,” Dave said, speaking of the lockout.

“You have a group of guys who know how to do their jobs. We got the production out, we did quality work and we did it safely. I worked in the three departments, and on the afternoon and midnight shifts we didn’t even have any supervision and we always got the product out.

“What company wouldn’t want to have a workforce like us, instead of always having to have someone standing over your head telling you ‘do this and do that’ all the time? Unless there is a breakdown or something, a supervisor is never there in the afternoon or midnight shifts.

“Health insurance is very important for us. We work with silica and acid fumes and lots of dangerous things in there.

“They don’t want to talk to the union; they are trying to break the union. I think the big companies are behind this, they want to use us to set the example.”

ATI began locking out its workforce at 12 mills in six states on August 14, several days after putting forward its “last, best, and final offer.” ATI is demanding steep increases in out-of-pocket health care payments, which can amount to more than \$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 turn 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.

ATI has replaced its workers with scabs through Strom Engineering of Minnesota, which specializes in hiring scabs for companies during strikes or lockouts.

ATI is being used as a model in the entire steel industry, which is seeking to place the full burden of the drop in demand and falling prices for steel onto the backs of its workers.

For its part, the United Steelworkers (USW), who represent the locked-out workers at ATI, continue to isolate and divide the workers. Thirty thousand steelworkers at US Steel and ArcelorMittal have been ordered to continue working despite the expiration of their contract on September 1. Both US Steel and ArcelorMittal are making similar demands for massive concessions in health care and contracting out as at ATI.

Far from defending steelworkers, the USW is seeking to prove to the companies that it can be relied upon to provide a disciplined workforce and thus serve as a second level of management in restoring the steelmakers' profits.



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