

US: Lockout of 2,200 steelworkers nears end of fourth month

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7 December 2015

US steelmakers are using the drastic slump in demand and falling prices to push for massive concessions and the destruction of many thousands of jobs. The United Steelworkers union (USW) is working with the companies to push through concessions by isolating and dividing the workers.

2,200 steelworkers employed Allegheny Technologies Inc. (ATI) are nearing the end of their fourth month of being locked out by the company. Last week the company went ahead with its threat to terminate health insurance for the locked out workers.

Sherwin Alumina, which has locked out its 450 employees for over a year, has made it clear that it has no intentions of ever rehiring the locked out workers. In negotiations held last month, the company increased the concessions it is demanding from the steelworkers.

Negotiations between the USW and the nation's two largest steelmakers, US Steel and ArcelorMittal have broken down in all but name. Contracts covering the 30,000 steelworkers expired September 1, but the USW ordered its members to continue working. Both companies have begun unilaterally imposing higher health care costs on retirees. Several thousand workers have also lost their jobs as the companies shut down mills and scale back production.

Cliff Natural Resources, where 2,600 iron ore miners in Michigan and Minnesota have been working since their contract expired on October 1, has also sent out letters to its retirees stating that their health care costs will be substantially increased in January.

ATI is setting the pattern for the steel industry and is demanding deep concessions in health care, increasing out-of-pocket payments, which can amount to over \$10,000 a year per family. ATI is also seeking a two-tier system in which new hires will not receive pension or health care benefits when they retire.

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 and allow the company to send workers home at any time.

Both ATI and Sherwin Alumina have hired scabs and are in the process of resuming production with the non-union workers.

For its part, the USW continues to isolate the workers at ATI, Sherwin Alumina and the other steelmakers. Far from representing the 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 steel producer's profits.

The WSWS recently spoke with a group of workers at ATI's flagship mill in Brackenridge, Pennsylvania about the cutoff of health benefits and the lockout.

Connie Ortman, a worker with 22 years' experience, opposed the companies' maneuvers. "This is not right. They have scabs in there doing our jobs and they are not even doing them very well. There are people getting hurt in there. We see ambulances coming in and out. We were working under the old contract. We were doing our work. Working 12 hours, 16 hours six or seven days a week for them to stockpile.

"They come in and said 'out,' after months of us working all kinds of overtime. Then they put in the papers how much money all the workers make, well you know it is because they worked us to death. We were working six or seven days a week, doubles and 12 hours. Yeah, we are going to make money. We didn't want to be doing that. They forced us. We can't say no."

"A lot of people are getting very anxious and upset

because they are afraid they are going to lose their house and cars, because they are bringing in other people to do our jobs,” Ortman stated.

“All I have is the emergency insurance from the union. All that covers is if I fall down and break my leg or somebody pokes my eye out or something. I can’t afford the COBRA, not on unemployment, it costs too much,” she concluded.

Beth Cribbs added, “It really sucks that it is happening now. They hired a lot of people in 1988. There are a lot of people with 27 ½ years. This has to be playing into this, because they know that in 2 ½ years there are going to be a lot of people up for retirement and trying to get their pensions.

“This is not a job that we should have to pay a penny for health insurance. It is not like we are working in an office or something. The chemicals you are breathing in and the dust, you don’t know what you are getting. There are days that after work when I am in the locker room I am blowing out my nose and it is all black until it starts to bleed, then I know it is clean. And we have respirators on.

“They have money to pay for health care. They have money to pay for all the scabs and the security guards who are just standing around all day doing nothing. They have money to pay our insurance. They got the money. I don’t agree with people saying we have to pay for it.”

Leisa Brothers, a worker with 22 years’ experience, said: “They want to break the union so that they don’t have to pay health insurance, so that they don’t have to pay a decent wage for working in this crap hole. People think that we got it made in here. These are dangerous jobs. People lose their lives in here. People lose their fingers in here. It is very unhealthy with all the stuff we are breathing in.

“They work you 10, 12 hour days and then they say they want you to come back tomorrow and you are like, I thought I was going to get one day off a month. When you work 10 or 16 hour days and then they want you to come back in 8 hours. How much sleep are you going to get, when you have to drive home, do the things that you got to do and sleep and come back. How safe is that.

“If you do get hurt in there, they harass you like crazy. They want you to come to work and punch in just so they can say that they have don’t have any

accidents.”

The author recommends:

USW isolates and divides steelworkers

[2 November 2015]



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