

After isolating locked-out ATI workers

Steelworkers union prepares to push through concessions contract at US Steel

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19 December 2015

The United Steelworkers union is laying the groundwork to push a major concessions contract upon the 18,000 steelworkers at US Steel nearly four months after ordering its members to continue working after their contract expired on September 1.

Any contract with US Steel will also further isolate the 450 steelworkers at Sherwin Alumina in Gregory, Texas who have been locked out of their jobs for over a year, and the 2,200 steelworkers at Allegheny Technologies (ATI) who have been locked out of their jobs since August 15. The ATI lockout has become one of the longest and largest lockouts in recent years.

The United Steelworkers (USW) have not released any details on what they are calling a “comprehensive contract proposal” presented by the steelmaker. In an indication that the proposal contains massive cuts to health care, destruction of jobs and assault on benefits for retired workers, the USW requested to meet this past week with US Steel officials to discuss the proposal.

No results of the talks have been reported. The USW is clearly hoping that they can tweak a few provisions of the proposal so that they can push it through to the membership. Meanwhile, ArcelorMittal, the second largest steel producer in the US, also continues to demand concessions in health care and retiree benefits, as well as job cuts.

The US and global steel industry is experiencing its largest downturn since the financial meltdown of 2008. After registering a small boom driven by the growth in oil and gas drilling, and strong demand from China, the plummet in gas, oil and other raw commodities prices along with the slowdown of the Chinese economy has led to a drastic falloff in demand for steel.

Steelmakers are seeking to push the full burden of the crisis onto the backs of the workers through destroying long-term gains made by the workers over generations.

ATI has led the assault. In what the company termed its “last, best, and final offer,” ATI is seeking to shift health care costs onto the employees, demanding that workers make various payments totaling over \$6,500 a year for a family. The company also wants to end pensions and retiree health care benefits for new-hires. ATI steelworkers were locked-out on August 15 and the company has since begun trying to run the mills using management and hiring scabs.

ATI is seeking to turn their workforce into a class of casual laborers. The company is demanding the ability to schedule workers for 12- and even 16-hour days without notice, and send workers home without pay if there is no work or a machine breaks down, in effect dismantling any vestige of the 8-hour day.

US Steel and ArcelorMittal have made similar demands. Far from representing the workers, the USW is collaborating with the steelmakers in attacking the workers. To this end, it has left the workers at Sherwin Alumina and ATI completely isolated. ATI workers have now lost their health insurance and their unemployment insurance is set to expire in less than two months. Far from fighting for these workers, the USW is using them as an example to threaten workers at US Steel and ArcelorMittal to accept whatever concessions are demanded.

Last week, ATI announced that it was idling two of its Pennsylvania mills, one in Latrobe, and the other in Leechburg. The move threatens to permanently destroy the jobs of several hundred workers. The Latrobe mill is currently broken so it is effectively idled and the

Leechburg mill is scheduled to be shut down in April.

Workers at ATI's mills in Pennsylvania spoke to the WSWS about the issues in their lockout. Workers at the Leechburg mill explained that it is extremely dangerous to idle such old equipment as once the furnaces cool off you never know if you will be able to bring them back on line.

A worker at the ATI Leechburg plant spoke of the hardships imposed on his family by the lockout, and ATI canceling health coverage.

"I got Medicaid, but that's probably because my wife's pregnant. I'm the sole provider of my household. They ask you what your bills are, and yadda yadda yadda, and I ended up getting the whole family covered—me, my wife, and my daughter. But I really think that's because my wife is pregnant."

The worker spoke about the attacks on health care at US Steel. "At US Steel, most of my buddies used to have options with health care coverage, but they cut that out. They're all with Aetna now. They used to have UPMC and others, but now it's just Aetna.

"We've been locked out for over 120 days. All this steel they've been giving them for the past few months has been steel we made. It hasn't been steel these scabs made. The shipping department was stacking coils four high—it was almost too dangerous to go into the shipping yard.

"We show up, we show our support. Do a lot of us want to go back to work? We never wanted to stop working. Do we have families? Yeah. My wife and kid just came out and ate lunch. My wife's pregnant, we have a kid due in May. Yeah, I want to go back to work! But do I want to go back to work under some BS contract? No! Will I look for other work? Yes! I'm not scared. It's part of the game. A lot of guys might go get other jobs and wait to see if we get another contract"

Mike Hill, a retired steelworker who had worked for over 38 years for ATI and its predecessor, Allegheny Ludlum, at the company's mill in Vandergrift, PA, added:

"I've been here since day one of the lockout. I come four or five times a week. I come at different times so I see everyone on the different shifts. I support these guys. It is ridiculous what the company is doing.

"The cuts in health care, the two-tier system for new-hires, the scheduling, they want to take away the things we fought for.

"US Steel and AM [ArcelorMittal] want the same things. They have been mirroring these people. If they get the concessions here, they will do the same thing there.

"My health care is paid out of VEBA. [A union-administered health care fund paid into by the companies.] They say the fund will run out in August. ATI has not been paying into it. I don't know what will happen to our health care at that time.

"I think we all have to stand together to fight this."



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