

Locked out ATI workers in US left isolated by United Steelworkers union

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The decision of the United Steelworkers to announce that the NLRB has decided to issue an unfair labor practice complaint against Allegheny Technologies Inc. over the lockout of 2,200 steelworkers is a stunt aimed at justifying the continued isolation of the locked out steelworkers, now in their fifth month off the job.

Rather than representing the workers, the USW is working to prevent the type of industrial and political struggle that would be required to defeat ATI as well as to defend the interests of all workers against the corporate and government assault on wages, jobs and living conditions.

It is no accident that the USW made public the NLRB decision the day before it announced a contract agreement with US Steel. While the details of the deal have not been made public, the contract likely contains deep cuts to health care for both active and retired workers, along with allowing the company to expand the use of contract labor.

Furthermore, the USW-US Steel contract will do nothing to stop the destruction of jobs, including the layoffs of 1,600 workers at US Steel's Fairfield Works in Fairfield, Alabama and the layoff of 2,000 workers at US Steel's Granite City Works in Illinois.

According to the USW statement, the NLRB complaint will cite ATI for bargaining in bad faith and locking the workers out in support of its bad faith bargaining, among other allegations.

The NLRB has not yet issued the complaint. If it does, it only begins a long legal process that most often ends in victory for the companies. The issuing of the complaint only means that the case will be presented first before an administrative judge, and if either side appeals that judge's decision, it goes to the federal courts. The entire process can take years.

The USW used the same tactic to justify the isolation

of the 450 steelworkers that have now been locked out for over 14 months by Sherwin Alumina in Gregory, Texas. In that case the USW also told workers to place their trust in the NLRB, filing similar unfair labor practice charges against the company. Recently the board ruled against the union and in favor of the company, rejecting the USW's arguments that the lockout violated US labor laws.

Over the past ten years a total of 224,720 unfair labor practice charges were filed with the NLRB. Of those, 76,626 settlements were reached. Of the remaining 148,094 charges filed, complaints were issued in only 12,405 cases. That is less than 9 percent. The NLRB web site did not list how many of those cases eventually were found in favor of the workers.

In addition to the NLRB cases, workers on the picket line are also being told that the US Steel settlement will set the stage for a settlement with ATI. In reality the opposite is the case. ATI management will be further emboldened to demand concessions that are deeper than those being granted to US Steel.

The 2,200 workers locked out by ATI are employed in 12 mills, in Pennsylvania, Ohio, New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts and Oregon.

ATI is demanding massive cuts in health care, which would cost workers between \$6,000 to \$10,000 per year. The company also demands the elimination of the defined pension and retiree health care for new hires.

The company wants work rule changes which would allow it to contract out 40 percent of the jobs, the elimination of overtime pay after eight hours, and even the end of the eight-hour work day, turning steelworkers into a form of casual labor.

For the entire year, ATI has been preparing for the lockout, stockpiling steel at all its facilities, hiring a small army of security guards and contracting with

Strom Engineering to recruit and train scabs in order to run the mills. On November 30, the company eliminated health care benefits for the workers.

In addition, 13,000 steelworkers at the world's largest steelmaker, ArcelorMittal, have also been without a contract since September 1 and have been ordered to remain on the job. ArcelorMittal has also been demanding massive concessions in health care, pensions and work rules.

Also, 2,600 iron ore miners working for Cliffs Natural Resources in Michigan and Minnesota have been ordered to remain on the job by the USW after their contracts expired on October 1, 2015.

Behind the assault on steelworkers is the intractable crisis of the capitalist system. Despite the trillions of dollars that have been poured into the financial system over the past eight years, the world economy remains stagnant. The past two years have witnessed a massive drop in commodity prices, especially oil and gas, with a corresponding drop in demand for steel tubular products. The further slowdown in China has led to a glut in other steel products and a corresponding fall in prices.

Following the example set in the auto industry, where new employees are paid just \$15 and \$16 an hour, the Obama administration is seeking to boost American manufacturing through the destruction of workers' living standards. One of the main concerns in the passage of the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare) was the aim of cutting health care costs for American industry.

The United Steelworkers is not negotiating for the workers, but rather in the interests of a highly paid bureaucracy which is seeking to prove its usefulness to the companies by policing its members and imposing the concessions and layoffs that the companies seek.

The USW is seeking to defend its privileged position by proving that it can be an asset in making the companies profitable by attacking the workers.

In particular, the union seeks to divide US steelworkers from steelworkers throughout the world, blaming the crisis in steel, not on the capitalist system, but on workers in China. In this way, not only does the USW seek to divert attention from its own record of betrayal, but also to support the war drive by the Obama administration in its pivot to Asia.

Steelworkers and other workers need new

organizations of struggle that unite steel and all workers internationally, and which are based on socialist policies, including the public ownership of steel and all basic industries under the democratic control of the workers.



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