

“If the company gets away with this, they will do it with other workers”

Locked out Allegheny Technologies workers to lose jobless benefits

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Steelworkers locked out by Allegheny Technologies Incorporated (ATI) for nearly six months will lose their unemployment insurance starting next week. ATI eliminated health coverage for the 2,200 workers in November, forcing workers to put off needed health care.

The United Steelworkers union (USW) has deliberately and systematically worked to isolate the locked-out ATI workers, using their hardship as a warning to bludgeon other workers into accepting concessions contracts.

The USW announced Monday that it had rammed through a concessionary contract for 18,000 workers at US Steel. The USW now aims to push through another concessions contract for 12,000 workers at ArcelorMittal, further isolating ATI workers.

The ATI workers, who have been locked out since August 15, receive just \$100 a week in strike pay from the USW's \$350 million strike fund.

Beth Cribbs, with more than 27 years at ATI, spoke at the ATI mill in Brackenridge, Pennsylvania, of the sacrifices the lockout has forced her to make. “It’s really affecting me. I did what the union told me and tried to prepare myself. I tried to save; I’m living bare-minimally. There was no Christmas this year.

“I’m not a big consumerist. I don’t want to buy stuff, but there are things that you need. I cancelled a vacation before this even happened because I knew it was going to happen. I was going to go to New England.”

After ATI cut off their health insurance in November, many ATI workers have been forced to forgo medical

care. Private insurance can cost up to \$1,800 per month for a family with children, almost the entire monthly unemployment benefit of about \$2,000 per month.

“I’ve just got the health care the union gave us.” Beth said, “If you get hurt, you can go to the emergency room, just don’t go to the doctor. I need to go every six months for my thyroid, but I’m just not doing it.

“My co-worker had an eye infection this week, and she missed a couple pickets and she’s still kind of sick, but she still hasn’t gone to the doctor because we don’t have insurance. We really can’t afford it. She has a mortgage, she has a car payment. Unemployment runs out in the middle of February. We’ve got a couple more weeks, that’s it.

“Right now I’m a shipper. I load coils on trucks. I have a fork-truck that I drive half an hour a day, and it’s diesel. You can see the smoke, it’s horrible, it should have been replaced. It’s really old.”

Beth said that when she complained about the smoke, the company didn’t replace the forklift with an electric one; instead, they had her wear a monitor all day.

“We’re breathing all this crap that is bad for us. It’s documented that working shifts is bad for your health. They shouldn’t mess with our health care, they really shouldn’t. We’re not working in an office. You have to work in the mill to understand. It’s nasty. It’s gotten better, but it’s still nasty.”

Connie Ortman, a worker with 22 years at the mill, said, “I know a lot of people are scared of running out of unemployment. People are going to lose their homes and everything.

“We are out here fighting for everyone. It is not just us, this whole community benefits. Even places that aren’t union have to pay better so they can get people to work for them. Now everybody is going to lose.

“This is what America has come to, they don’t respect the working people.”

ATI locked out workers at 12 facilities in six states August 14, shortly after publishing its “last, best, and final offer.” ATI is demanding steep increases in health care costs, amounting to up to \$10,000 or more per family per year, along with the elimination of defined-benefit pensions for new hires.

In addition, ATI is demanding the ability to contract out up to 40 percent of all jobs, and scheduling rules that effectively transform workers into “on-call” employees. ATI has been staffing its facilities with scabs from strikebreaking contractor Strom Engineering, guarded by a small army of security guards.

Renda Allensworth, a retired steelworker with more than 33 years in the mill, said, “I’m here supporting my union brothers and sisters. This company makes lots of money.

“Steelworkers need health care. You go inside this mill and you are breathing all this smoke and chemicals, you don’t know what it is doing to your body. Insurance is a big issue. I got hurt a few times in here and I am going to the doctor for my thyroid gland right now.

“If the company gets away with this, they will do it with other workers.”

Another worker with 10 years at the Brackenridge mill, who asked that his name not be used, said, “I don’t feel good about this. ATI is doing this illegally. They want too much from us. It is everything. They want to cut our health care, contract out our jobs and move our schedules anyway they want. They could make us work 12-hour turns and not get overtime, have us work Sunday, Monday and Tuesday and not come in Wednesday or Thursday. This is ridiculous.

“It is time to stop this. A lot of families are hurting because of this. They don’t want a middle class any more, they’ve been doing this for years.”

Both Beth and Connie reported that they are being told that if the company does call them back, they will have to work alongside the scabs that have been hired.

“The company is going to keep the scabs,” side

Connie. “When we go back, we are going to have to work side by side with the scabs. When they go in, they laugh at us, shout at us that they have our jobs. I am out here losing money and they are going to profit from it.”

Speaking of ATI’s decision to idle the Bagdad and Midland plants in western Pennsylvania, Beth said, “That affects a lot of people. Our plant has three different jobs that are just dealing with silicon. That’s going to cut about a quarter of our workforce, plus they don’t know what they’re going to do with the plants that they’re going to idle.”

In opposition to the nationalist hate-mongering of the USW, Beth expressed heartfelt sympathy for refugees of imperialist wars who have sought asylum in Europe “I want to go over there and help them [the refugees]. It’s ridiculous. There’s no such thing as an illegal person.

“Wouldn’t you love to just go over there and help? Just the other day, I heard about one of those boats that collapsed, and I don’t know how many kids were in it. It’s ridiculous. It’s like people don’t study history. The same thing we did to the Jewish people that were trying to come here, and we just turned them away.”



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