

Lockout of steelworkers at ATI enters sixth month

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Six months have now passed since Allegheny Technologies Inc. (ATI) locked out 2,200 workers in six states. Through the entire process, the United Steelworkers union (USW) has worked deliberately to isolate and sabotage the struggle of ATI workers, using their hardship as a warning to blackmail other steelworkers to accept deep concessions.

“We’re the scapegoats of the steel industry, because they wanted to see what would happen to us if we caved into their demands and go crying back to work,” said Tom McCulloch, a truck driver with 42 years at ATI.

“The concessions [ATI demanded] were taking us back to 1930, that’s why we didn’t accept it. We would have worked under the old contract.”

Along with many other concession demands, ATI is demanding the ability to schedule workers arbitrarily and irregularly, with little prior notice and no guaranteed overtime after eight hours of work per day. “If there’s nothing to penalize them on a work schedule, then they’ll schedule anything, because there’s nothing going to take anything out of their pocket. If you’re going to screw someone’s whole life schedule up, you should pay them a little bit more.”

Herb Maurhoff, a worker with eight years at ATI, explained the grueling schedules workers are forced to keep. “I was fortunate, and my brother was fortunate. I was in the electrical department, so in the last year we were only forced to work six days a week. Some of the production people, they were working seven days a week for three years. How can they do that to those people?”

ATI stopped paying healthcare benefits to its locked out employees at the end of November last year, forcing many workers to forego prescriptions, health screenings and medical procedures.

“We’ve got insurance from the union, but it’s just for

emergency purposes,” explained Sam Freehling, a truck driver with 21 years at ATI. “A couple weeks ago, I cut my finger with a razor knife, and I probably should have had stitches, but I couldn’t just go to the doctor. After that, I sat at home for two weeks thinking ‘I’ve really got to start watching what I’m doing,’ because this could have really been serious if it got infected. I was afraid to do anything.

“I was reading [in a WSWs leaflet about the ATI lockout] that someone had an eye infection, and I’ve got the same thing with my eye. You just don’t go to the doctor.”

Sam no longer has coverage for prescription medications. “I have an acid reflux problem, and I take one of those [pills] a day.”

Tom noted that a fellow ATI worker, nicknamed Buckethead, had died after foregoing medical treatment due to lack of proper insurance. “He said he was having chest pains in the evening, and he didn’t want to go to the doctor because of his new insurance. That just happened a couple weeks ago. He died. He was probably my age, about 61 or 62. If he had the regular insurance, he probably would have gone that night, but instead he waited until the morning, but he never got to see the morning.”

ATI aims to convert up to 40 percent of its labor force, including truckers, to non-union contractors. “They wanted to get rid of all the non-core employees, and we were non-core,” said Tom.

ATI already contracted out some trucking positions several years ago during the construction of the \$1.3 billion Brackenridge hot rolling mill. “They told us it was going to be through attrition, but there were four of the bottom-seniority guys that they took out. It was wrong, because the company said it was going to be through attrition: if somebody retires, if somebody bids

out, they're not going to replace us. But they just stole them.”

“The union backed them too, that's how they got rid of our truck jobs. To get the mill worth \$1.2 billion, the union said, 'Alright, see ya.’”

This month ATI workers will stop receiving unemployment insurance, currently about \$2,000 a month. Locked out workers will have essentially no income after unemployment benefits end.

“Strike benefits are \$100 every two weeks, they were cut back at Christmastime,” explained Sam. Sam, who is single, did not know if this cut also applied to workers with families. This is a 50 percent cut from the already miserly \$100 per week the USW had been paying out from its \$350 million strike and defense fund, with an extra \$100 per month per worker hoarded by local unions and distributed at their discretion.

Workers reported in early November that USW international officials were considering cutting ATI strike pay to prepare for a “real struggle” at US Steel and ArcelorMittal, whose contracts ended September 1 last year. In fact, the opposite is true: The USW aims to isolate and starve ATI workers into submission to make an example of them and push deep concessions onto other steelworkers.

After ordering workers at US Steel and ArcelorMittal to remain on the job indefinitely, on February 1, the USW succeeded in pushing through a concessions contract for 18,000 US Steel workers. The USW has since offered to enforce millions of dollars in “innovative” concessions on 12,000 ArcelorMittal workers.

The deal at US Steel and any deal at ArcelorMittal only further isolates the locked out workers at ATI as well as Sherwin Alumina, where 450 workers have been locked out for over a year.

Sherwin Alumina recently announced its intention shut down its plant in Gregory, Texas as early as March 31. In response to the prospect of the permanent loss of locked out workers' jobs, the USW states that it would simply accept the shutdown and “do everything we can to maximize the benefits that our members and retirees have coming to them.”

After half a year of isolation and starvation rations, the USW is now asking ATI workers to place their faith in their unfair labor practices lawsuit filed with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). The NLRB

found that ATI has bargained in bad faith, and has set a hearing with an NLRB administrative judge on May 23, asking that ATI “bargain in good faith” in the interim.

The USW claims that if workers wait for three months on essentially zero income, the NLRB will force ATI to rehire them with back pay.

Workers should place no confidence in the NLRB which is fully on board with the Obama administration's drive to lower workers' wages and living standards to make US industry globally competitive. The USW's NLRB lawsuit, like its anti-China trade lawsuits, is another trap aimed at preventing workers from taking up an independent political struggle in their own interests against the assault on their jobs and living standards.

Despite the USW's rabid anti-Chinese chauvinism, Tom noted that ATI had actually benefited from the boom in Chinese steel demand in the years following the financial crisis of 2007-2009. “ATI was going to go out of the silicon [steel] business, and China started buying silicon here. They're going to close Bagdad down now, but that's what kept them going. They were going to close it before, but then the price for silicon went through the roof.” The price of North American silicon steel, over \$2,250/ton in February 2011, has fallen nearly 40 percent to below \$1,500/ton in January 2016 and the Bagdad, Pennsylvania mill is again slated for shutdown.



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