ATI steelworkers in US return to work

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Nearly one month after returning to work, 2,000 workers at Allegheny Technologies Inc. (ATI) are being subjected to a management dictatorship with the full complicity of the United Steelworkers union (USW). The conditions now faced by ATI workers demonstrate the magnitude of the betrayal carried out by the USW in the contract it forced through on March 1.

The USW called the sellout agreement ending the seven-month long ATI lockout a victory. The title of the contract summary handed workers before the ratification vote was "How ATI's Assault on Our Contract Imploded." After ratification, USW International President Leo Gerard claimed, "The strength and solidarity of our union paid off with a fair contract that contains virtually none of the drastic concessions ATI sought to arbitrarily impose."

In fact ATI workers have been thrown back decades. After isolating locked-out ATI workers from the hundreds of thousands of workers engaged in contract battles in steel, auto, telecommunications and other industries, the USW forced through a contract that gives in to all of ATI's major demands. The agreement essentially reduces workers to the status of casual laborers, completely at the mercy of the company and its USW accomplices.

ATI workers began to return to the factories on March 14, exactly seven months after the lockout began. Once back on the job they confronted a bosses' dictatorship. Workers were informed that the USW had agreed to suspend grievance procedures for 60 days. ATI bosses took this as a blank check to subjugate and humiliate workers.

For four of the seven months during which they were locked out, ATI workers did not receive adequate health care coverage, and one month they spent without unemployment benefits. During this time they received insulting grocery cards from the USW of $50-100 a week instead of strike pay. As a result, most workers were forced to drain their savings.

After all this, the USW is saying workers must now front money for medical bills while their health insurance is restored piecemeal, thus forcing workers to rely on future reimbursements from a company that locked them out for seven months.

In addition, with the complicity of the USW, ATI appears to be cheating workers out of compensation they are owed. Although workers were supposed to receive supplemental unemployment benefits from ATI, workers report discovering this fact only after the deadline to submit the paperwork has passed. One worker reports receiving a paycheck that does not include the $1 an hour raise promised in the contract.

The conditions at ATI are a stark warning to the 12,000 USW members who have been without a contract since September 1 at the world's largest steel manufacturer ArcelorMittal. Undoubtedly the ATI contract will serve as a model for what these workers can expect.

Workers returned to find vandalized and damaged facilities, the product of seven months of scab labor. Workers report finding the locomotive shop littered with human feces, left by departing Strom Engineering scabs. Many machines were broken, either from incompetence or sabotage. Maintenance workers reported that their lockers had been broken into and their tools stolen.

Even as scabs were defiling ATI's facilities, the company provided numerous amenities it had previously withheld. Workers report finding new heating and air conditioning units installed, and new safety walkways with guardrails.

Workers report that much of the remaining workforce has not been called back, even at the plants that are still operating. Roughly 200 older workers retired under duress during the lockout. Even so, younger workers

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report being uncertain as to whether they will be called back full time.

Those that have been called back are working regularly scheduled 12-hour shifts. They are often forced to work on several machines per shift, effectively doing the jobs of multiple workers. At the same time, some workers report being forced to wait idly for hours.

"They say the scheduling is because it's an emergency situation," explained one worker. "One of the reasons we went out was for scheduling." Before the lockout, workers at ATI's Brackenridge plant were regularly scheduled seven days a week, for 10-12 hours a shift. One Brackenridge worker reported working over 4,000 hours in one year, equivalent to 80 hours a week.

These scheduling practices are permitted under the contract language agreed to by the USW. Indeed, workers can be forced to work up to 16-hour days with no notice under "emergency situations."

In effect, management has free rein. While the USW agreed to waive the arbitration process 60 days, this may be extended for the time period the company says is necessary to restore production.

Even with hundreds of workers on layoff, ATI bosses continue to perform many of the jobs they took over during the lockout. Operation of ATI's seven internal trucks has been almost entirely taken over by management personnel. Bosses also operate cranes and forklifts. The USW had led workers to believe that contract language allowing bosses to do their jobs was only for the purpose of training new workers.

Workers report that a large number of outside contractors have been brought in to perform maintenance work, even as experienced maintenance workers remain laid off. This increase in contracting is also permitted under the new contract during so-called "surge" conditions.

External trucking was contracted out before the lockout. As a result, the current truckers are largely the same people who crossed the picket line throughout the lockout.

Health care coverage, which ATI cut off in November 2015, was not immediately reinstated after the contract was ratified. Instead, workers were forced to re-apply for coverage, a process that can take weeks. "There was a week or two where we didn't know how we were covered," one worker reported. "I heard stories about people going to the doctor, and hearing that their coverage hadn't started yet. The union told them to just keep their receipts, and the company would reimburse them."

ATI, like steel companies all over the world, is faced with a major downturn in the industry, as steel demand plummets, particularly in China. Global steel overcapacity is over 300 million tons, substantially more than all US steel production capacity. As a result, the price of benchmark hot-rolled coil steel fell from over $600/ton in February 2013 to under $300/ton in December 2015.

Like unions the world over, the USW is determined to keep domestic steel companies profitable by attacking the living standards of steelworkers in the US, and promoting economic nationalism to turn US workers against their brothers and sisters in other countries.

Only days after the contract ratification, the USW launched an anti-dumping lawsuit against Chinese sheet and strip steel, in direct partnership with ATI and other US-based steel companies.

The bitter experience of ATI workers demonstrates the pro-company, anti-worker character of the USW. Workers can win nothing within the straitjacket of the corporatist trade unions. We urge workers to form rank-and-file committees independent of the USW and management to fight for their interests.

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