

ATI workers speak to SEP campaigners

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A Socialist Equality Party (SEP) team campaigning for Jerry White for president and Niles Niemuth for vice president spoke to workers during a shift change at the Allegheny Technologies Incorporated (ATI) Brackenridge mill. The response was overwhelmingly positive. Over 50 workers took copies of the SEP's election statement, with many workers expressing disgust with the Democratic and Republican nominees, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. Workers also described the escalating attacks on their jobs and living standards after the United Steelworkers (USW) betrayal of the seven-month ATI lockout.

The SEP's call for an independent movement of the working class won a hearing, and some support among ATI workers.

When a campaigner explained that the SEP is building a movement in opposition to the banks, corporations, and big-business parties, a worker initially responded somewhat skeptically, "Good luck with that." When the campaigner responded "We can't do it alone," the worker raised his fist in the air and responded, this time in an earnest tone, "Strength in numbers!"

Toward the end of the shift change, one worker asked, "Are other workers taking these [leaflets]?" When SEP campaigners responded in the affirmative, they replied "Good."

Several workers referred approvingly to the consistent coverage by the WSWS of the seven-month ATI lockout. One worker who initially refused a leaflet changed his mind after an SEP campaigner reminded him of the WSWS coverage of the lockout.

Many workers expressed hostility towards the big-business presidential candidates.

Asked about the election, Bud, an ATI worker, responded, "Hillary, we already had her for eight years, and we know how that turned out. We know what she's capable of, and it's not good."

Speaking of Trump, he continued, "I don't want a president that encourages people to kill the other candidate, no matter how subtle a reference it is."

Another Brackenridge worker commented on the election, "Which one do you pick? The good, the bad, or the ugly?"

Just over one year ago, ATI locked out 2,200 workers in its Flat Rolled Products division, including 1,100 workers in Western Pennsylvania, and about 600 workers at the Brackenridge mill. The company demanded major increases in healthcare payments, a two-tier benefit system for new hires, and contract language allowing highly arbitrary scheduling and increased use of outside contractors. The USW isolated the lockout from 35,000 steelworkers at US Steel and ArcelorMittal, and hundreds of thousands of auto, telecommunications, and municipal workers whose contracts expired during the same period.

Ultimately, the USW pushed through a contract that gave in to all of ATI's major demands, and allowed the company to idle the Bagdad and Midland plants, leaving 420 workers jobless.

An ATI worker from the finishing department described conditions inside the Brackenridge mill: "It's the same as before, not nearly enough people. One thing that did change is that initially we were a just-in-time operation. Now they're stockpiling, which they didn't do before, except right before the lockout."

In the months before the lockout, ATI forced many workers to work overtime for months on end to manufacture a stockpile of steel, which was then used to fill orders during the lockout. At the beginning of the lockout, workers reported logging as many as 4,000 hours the previous year, averaging roughly 80 hours per week.

The global steel industry currently suffers from low demand, and resulting low prices, with corporations opting to hoard trillions of dollars instead of reinvesting

in production or rebuilding rotting infrastructure. ATI, like the rest of the US steel industry, has responded to the crisis of the steel industry by attacking the jobs and living standards of ATI workers, shutting down the least profitable plants.

Another ATI worker described the effects of the lockout: “There aren’t a lot of the oldest guys left. At least a quarter of everybody retired, a lot of experienced people.

“A big layoff is coming up, August 1 offered voluntary layoff. They say orders are slow, even though they’re shipping lots of coils out.

“A lot of coils are only being partially processed in Brackenridge, then shipped to Louisville or to outside non-union shops for post-processing, even though a lot of this could be done in Brackenridge.

“They might shut down or curtail some departments [in Brackenridge]. The finishing department is just daylight now. So are many others.” Steel mills generally run continuously, day and night, in some cases on a “21-turn” work schedule.

The worker continued: “The melt shop is off on weekends now. They don’t have enough people or orders to work 21-turn. The two [remaining] operations that were seven days a week are now five days.”

In the immediate aftermath of the lockout, ATI forced many workers into extreme overtime to restart operations. The worker explained: “A lot of guys are pretty burned out, even new guys. They would say, ‘This is killing me. It’s hard on my family, I never get time off.’”

Asked about the 420 workers from the idled Bagdad and Midland plants, he said, “There haven’t been any new hires. They brought in some maintenance people from Bagdad, some salaried people from Midland, none of the worker workers. With the slowdown, it doesn’t look like they will be coming back any time soon.”

While workers pay the steep price of the USW’s betrayal, the local USW bureaucrats who helped push it through are being rewarded. “Fran has an International job, as a safety coordinator,” they said of Fran Arabia, who was president of the Brackenridge USW Local, 1196, during the lockout. During the lockout, Arabia chose to send “left-over” strike pay back to the International, rather than supplement the miserly \$50-100 per week in grocery gift cards doled out to locked-out workers.

Chuck, who lives a few miles from the Bagdad plant in Leechburg, spoke about the effect of the givebacks on health contributions for ATI retirees. “I think it’s terrible. My brother-in-law worked for ATI, he thought his pension was locked in. Then they raised his healthcare, and now he has to work another job to make up for it. When you work for 30 years, you would think you would be locked in. It’s crazy, what do they expect these people to do?”



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