

Backed by Democrats, union pushes sellout deal to end Momentive strike

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As the strike of 700 workers at Momentive Performance Materials, a specialized chemical plant in Waterford, New York, entered its fourth month, a tentative contract was reached late last Wednesday between the company and International Union of Electrical Workers-Communications Workers of America (IUE-CWA) union Locals 81359 and 81380.

The final negotiations were reportedly conducted with the direct intervention of aides to New York's Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo. Over the last few weeks, Democratic politicians, including the governor, both US senators and the state's comptroller put on a full court press to force another concessions-filled contract onto the strikers.

A ratification vote will be held on Monday and Tuesday. Full details of the proposed contract have not yet been publicly disclosed. However, some information is available. The *Times Union* reports the agreement includes pay increases of 2 percent per year over the next two years and maintains the company's matching payment to the employees' retirement fund. The offer also includes a \$2,000 signing bonus to exploit the economic difficulties of strikers.

These meager increases are more than made up by reductions in health insurance coverage and vacation accruals. In addition, the company will terminate health and life insurance benefits for retirees. These last two are especially egregious given that Momentive workers are affected by long-term exposure to toxic chemicals, which impact their health and longevity.

The pay increases are an insult to the workers, barely covering current inflation and doing nothing to make up for past losses. Momentive workers had suffered severe cuts in wages and benefits under contracts negotiated by the union in 2010 and 2013. These attacks were undertaken by a group of asset-stripping hedge funds, which purchased what became Momentive from General Electric in 2006. To finance the purchase, Apollo Global Management borrowed \$3.8 billion, which it now must pay back by extracting super-profits from its workforce.

In a further attack, the company plans to cut the workforce by up to 100 workers, leading to increased pressure on the remaining workforce. The proposed agreement also gives Momentive latitude for increased automation.

Another issue is the fate of workers fired during the strike. Reports vary, but up to 40 workers were accused by Momentive of alleged acts against the company, either while on the picket line or in some form of sabotage within the plant prior to the strike. Preliminary reports indicate that instead of insisting on the reinstatement of all the fired workers, the union has agreed to accept the results of a supposedly independent review process conducted by a panel appointed by Governor Cuomo, which leaves the workers in great jeopardy.

There is strong sentiment among the workers that they all should return together. One worker, Craig Finigan, told *The Alt*, "Of the 200 people I spoke with today, we still believe this isn't good enough. They're not going to let everyone back in at the same time. Workers like me would still be spending three to six months on the sidelines."

Momentive workers overwhelmingly rejected the previous concessions-laden contract proposal negotiated by the IUE-CWA and forced the union to call a strike. From the beginning, workers expressed their firm determination to make up for the previous losses. The latest sellout proposal by the union would put workers even further behind and exposes the utter bankruptcy and betrayal of the organization that supposedly represents them.

The union is presenting this proposed contract as a victory. Dennis Trainor, vice president for CWA District One, said, "We believe we have reached an agreement that addresses the concerns of our striking members about retirement health and pension security." (Trainor tried to claim the same thing after helping sell out 39,000 Verizon strikers in the summer of 2016, leaving them open to job losses, increased health care costs and other attacks).

Many Momentive strikers view the deal very differently.

One worker, speaking to the *Times Union*, expressed exasperation at the choice they confront. He asked, "But

what will happen if we vote this down? The governor, [US Senators Charles] Schumer, [Kirsten] Gillibrand, [state Comptroller Tom] DiNapoli and everyone else is already supporting it. If we vote ‘no,’ we will have no support from anyone.”

The unions have pushed the lie that workers need the “support” of the Democrats. In fact, they are big business politicians thoroughly hostile to the needs of workers. DiNapoli, for example, controls the New York State pension fund, which has a roughly \$34 million investment in Apollo Global Management, the hedge fund that is currently the largest minority owner of Momentive, and therefore has a vested interest in maintaining its profitability.

This strike has put these 700 industrial workers in direct conflict with the new Trump administration. Their situation mirrors that of tens of millions of workers and their families across the country who have seen their lives devastated over the last several decades by stagnant or declining wages, cuts in benefits, increases in housing costs, etc., as the economy came to be dominated by financial speculators under both Democratic and Republican administrations. The accession of Trump and his coterie of billionaires and ultra-right wing enemies of the working class means a sharp escalation of these attacks.

Several strikers told the media they had voted for Trump based on his campaign promises to bring back jobs. The *Daily News* quoted one Momentive striker, Carmine Cervini, as saying, “Trump promised to help America, to get us good jobs. Well here we are, fighting for our good jobs. I voted for him. I’m going to give him a chance.” Another worker said, “I gave him my vote because of what he promised--now I want to see him earn it.”

These illusions began to be exposed when Trump nominated Stephen Schwarzman as chairman of his “Strategic and Policy Forum,” a body of corporate executives from top US corporations, along with union officials such as AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka. Schwarzman is a billionaire who made his fortune in private equity deals, buying and stripping companies’ assets. He is founder and CEO of the Blackstone Group, a part owner of Momentive. Unlike Trump’s earlier and completely bogus intervention with Carrier, not even a token gesture has been made by the administration regarding the Momentive workers.

Another striker, Amber Izzo, expressed her concerns about Trump to the *Daily News*. “I never voted before in my life, my first vote was for Trump. I like his straight talk. But then I heard he’s got Schwarzman creating jobs, and I thought, ‘Oh man, that’s a problem.’”

As an illustration of utter bankruptcy of the union’s effort to bolster illusions that pressure can be exerted on

Republican or Democratic politicians, last week the union staged a protest outside of Schwarzman’s home in Manhattan. The CWA held another diversionary stunt in Washington, with union members handing out leaflets near the White House as Trump met with Schwarzman.

In addition to the intervention in the negotiations by Cuomo aides, other politicians, including both of New York’s senators, Schumer and Gillibrand, had recently intervened in an attempt to end the strike. Last week, a group of 10 state legislators and the state comptroller, Thomas DiNapoli, made photo-op visits to the picket line to urge a settlement.

The union expressed high praise for Cuomo’s intervention, with the head of the New York AFL-CIO stating that the governor had exhibited “true leadership.” The resulting sellout agreement reveals the true nature of this “leadership,” and the unity of Democrats, Republicans and union bureaucracy in the all-out assault on working people.

For its part, IUE-CWA, a large, national union, with hundreds of thousands of members, has left the strikers to walk the picket line for three months, under increasingly harsh winter conditions, as scabs were bused in every day. While other local workers would frequently join the picket line, the union blocked any effort to unify strikers with workers across the country who themselves have suffered from decades of attacks and deteriorating living standards.

Such a mobilization, the unions fear, would have led to a direct confrontation not only with the Trump administration, but the Democrats as well.

The proposed Momentive settlement, which must still be ratified by the workers, is being hailed by the press, the union and the politicians as a tremendous victory. As was the case with last year’s deal between the CWA and Verizon, it is nothing of the sort. This proposal must be rejected!

To take this fight forward Momentive workers must break from the straitjacket imposed on them by the union and form independent strike committees to marshal the vast potential support from workers across the country and around the world who face the same struggle as you. The Socialist Equality Party stands ready to assist workers in this fight. Contact us via the World Socialist Web Site.



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