

Momentive strikers forced to take pay and health cuts as US owner throws a multi-million-dollar party

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Workers at the Momentive chemical plant in upstate New York are returning to work today after a three-month strike. Under the pressure of the unions, which kept the strike isolated, the 700 workers at the former General Electric chemical plant voted to accept a sellout deal pushed by International Union of Electrical Workers-Communications Workers of America (IUE-CWA) and state Democratic Party officials.

The union accepted the bulk of the company's demands, including a 25 percent cost share for medical benefits by 2019 and other givebacks for current and retired workers. IUE-CWA Local 81359 also agreed to send workers back without some 40 workers who were fired for alleged picket line misconduct and vandalism.

The union had initially opposed any agreement without amnesty, worried about the reaction of workers determined not to go back to work without their framed-up brothers. That changed after the intervention of Governor Andrew Cuomo. The IUE-CWA has abandoned these workers to a supposedly neutral arbiter who will decide their fates on a case-by-case basis. Roughly two dozen scabs have been permanently hired to replace the fired workers.

Frightened by rank-and-file opposition to the sellout, the union decided to have a call-in conference on Saturday to discuss the terms of the deal. Local media reports that the vote was three to two in favor, that is, there remained substantial opposition.

"We're pleased that Momentive workers have ratified the tentative agreement and their 15-week struggle to protect good jobs in upstate New York has come to an end," said CWA District 1 Vice President Dennis Trainor. "It is understandable that some members felt that they didn't achieve everything they

wanted or deserved, but this agreement represents a substantial improvement over the company's 'take it or leave it' offer," he claimed.

On a local Facebook page, workers and their spouses expressed opposition to the deal. "This is not a 'win' as the media is stating," one worker wrote. "Cuomo didn't come to our rescue and get these guys back to work. We are hoping and praying this contract gets voted down. Why after so long on strike would we not want them back to work? We do. However, this contract is crap. These men and women have been out for over 100 days and they want them to take a contract with more concessions..."

"This contract is being shoved down their throats by many parties and some may feel pressured to vote yes. Some may not have the fight in them anymore. But they went out to fight and as far as we're concerned we keep fighting until it's fair. Be it another 100 days."

Bill Johnson, a 30-year Momentive employee, told the *Daily Gazette* of Schenectady that he abstained from voting. "I don't appreciate the way the company's been treating us, and I don't appreciate them trumping up charges on other employees just to use them as pawns," he said. "Hopefully, we all go back together."

The CWA is fresh from selling out last year's strike by 39,000 Verizon workers and forcing 20,000 AT&T Mobility wireless workers to stay on the job after their contract expired last week, despite demands for sweeping concessions and a 93 percent vote by workers to authorize a strike.

Momentive Performance Materials (MPM) was sold to a New York City-based hedge fund a decade ago by General Electric Co. It is owned by a consortium that

includes six billionaires, among them Stephen Schwarzman, CEO of the Blackstone Group, the largest hedge fund in the world.

Donald Trump named Schwarzman to head his Strategic and Policy Forum, a group of dozens of corporate executives, including former GE CEO Jack Welch, that are pushing massive corporate tax cuts and the elimination of occupation health and safety and environmental regulations.

According to the *Times Union* of Albany, New York, “Schwarzman’s name appears on financial disclosure forms filed by Momenite in March with the US Securities and Exchange Commission. A group called GSO Capital Partners, which is controlled by Schwarzman and Blackstone, held a nearly 7 percent stake in Momenite.”

While Momenite insists that there is no money for retiree health care, decent wages and secure jobs for workers, Schwarzman has an estimated net worth of \$11 billion. The *Times Union* reports that he has estates in East Hampton, New York, Saint-Tropez in the French Riviera, a beachfront villa in Jamaica, and a luxury Park Avenue apartment in New York City that was once home to John D. Rockefeller.

Over the weekend, as Momenite workers who have gone without a paycheck for 15 weeks were considering whether they could continue their battle, Schwarzman was enjoying a multi-million-dollar party for his 70th birthday.

According to *Town and Country*, the lifestyle magazine for the wealthy, “The Blackstone co-founder and his wife, Christine, hosted about 600 guests at their 15,000-plus square-foot estate in Palm Beach, which is only about a mile-and-a-half from Mar-a-Lago, Donald Trump’s private club, which he’s taken to calling the ‘winter White House.’

“Saturday night’s party reportedly included a private dinner with ‘acrobats, Mongolian soldiers and two camels,’ billionaire attendee David Koch told Bloomberg. Invitations to the party ‘arrived with a video hinting that the theme will be an exotic journey: An old-fashioned boat crosses animated illustrations of Venice, Arabia and Mongolia, and then arrives at Schwarzman’s Mediterranean-style Palm Beach estate,’ an invitee said. Gwen Stefani and Jersey Boys stars performed, and a massive fireworks display took place on the Intracoastal Waterway.”

While the president and the first lady were reportedly planning to attend, they remained at Mar-a-Lago, where they were hosting Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and threatening military action against North Korea.

“Jared Kushner and Ivanka Trump were photographed leaving Mar-a-Lago in black tie, reportedly en route to Schwarzman’s party,” *Town and Country* reported. “Presumptive incoming Trump cabinet members Steve Mnuchin, Wilbur Ross, and Elaine Chao also attended, along with luminaries like Donatella Versace, Jean Pigozzi, and former Viacom chair Philippe Dauman.

“You walked into what used to be the tennis court, and there was a balcony with trapeze artists,” art dealer Larry Gagosian told Bloomberg of the party, which was produced by Van Wyck & Van Wyck. “The level of detail and creativity, it was extraordinary. Steve loves parties,” *Town and Country* reported.

Meanwhile, 65,000 former hourly workers at General Electric—which sold the Waterford, New York plant to Blackstone and other hedge funds—have been stripped of their employer-paid retiree medical plans and forced to buy more expensive and inferior coverage on private health exchanges.

In addition to Schwarzman, Welch and other corporate executives, the president’s Strategic and Policy Forum also includes AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka. After opposing Trump and backing Clinton, the unions have clamored to work with the billionaire president and promoted Trump’s “America First” nationalism, which blames foreign workers, not the financial sharks and capitalist exploiters like Trump and Schwarzman, for the impoverishment of the American working class.



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