Thousands of rank-and-file US Steel workers cast unanimous votes to strike

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In a display of the growing militancy of the working class in the United States, rank-and-file workers at US Steel plants across the country cast a series of unanimous strike votes this week. The powerful strike votes take place as other workers, including teachers in the state of Washington, engage in a series of walkouts.

The United Steelworkers (USW) union conducted the strike authorization votes after announcing last Saturday that it would to extend current labor agreements beyond their expiration dates while continuing contract talks with US Steel and ArcelorMittal. The contracts, which were due to expire September 1, cover 16,000 US Steel workers and 15,000 ArcelorMittal workers at mills and other facilities in Pennsylvania, Indiana, Illinois, Alabama, Minnesota and other states.

From Tuesday to Thursday, one local union chapter after the other announced that rank-and-file members had voted unanimously to strike at US Steel plants, in spite of the company's attempt to coax workers with signing bonuses of thousands of dollars. Over 600 workers at US Steel's iron ore operation in Minntac, Minnesota were the first to cast a unanimous vote after three voting sessions Tuesday. On the same day, workers at US Steel in Fairfield, Alabama followed, with over 400 voting unanimously to authorize a strike.

On Wednesday, US Steel workers in Gary, Indiana packed union halls throughout the day to deliver a unanimous strike vote. Out of three USW locals at the plant, Local 1066 delivered a vote of 1,055-0, with a few hundred members abstaining. Around 700 workers at US Steel Clairton Coke Works near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania also passed a unanimous vote the same day.

Workers at US Steel in Granite City, Illinois; Portage and East Chicago, Indiana; and the Irvin Works and Edgar Thomson Works near Pittsburgh all passed unanimous votes Thursday, according to the USW.

The vote expressed the determination of steelworkers to fight the historic concessions demands by US Steel, which made $1.38 billion in gross profits last year. The company's stock price remains over twice as high as it was before the 2015 contract negotiations, in part due to the jump in the price of hot-rolled steel to over $900 per ton after Trump's tariffs took effect in June.

"I am so proud of all these men and women for finally saying enough is enough," a worker with over 23 years of experience at Gary Works told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "We, as the working class, must stand together in unity to ensure retirees, current workers and future generations of the working class can live free of the corruption-laden system we are currently working under."

The militancy of workers stands in sharp contrast to the United Steelworkers, which has repeatedly stated that it will do anything to avoid a strike. The local union bureaucracy was "completely puzzled" by the vote, the Gary steelworker said. "They never thought in a million years this would happen. I believe they really don't know what to do. I imagine the job loss threats will be coming shortly."

In 2015, the USW used the threat of mass layoffs to push through deep concessions, which froze wages for three years, increased healthcare costs and introduced lower-paid tiers. The deal also established so-called alternative work schedules which keep workers toiling around the clock in dangerous conditions, with little or no time to spend with their families.

The USW said the sacrifices were needed to keep the companies profitable against foreign competitors and "save jobs." After blackmailing workers into voting for the deal, the USW proceeded to oversee thousands of

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job cuts.

The USW called the strike vote at US Steel to allow workers to blow off steam and to try to regain a level of credibility among workers. In the course of the current contract talks, the USW has kept workers in the dark and refused to share any counterproposals with the rank and file. This only underscores the fact that the USW is laying the groundwork for even greater betrayals.

US Steel is demanding an unprecedented seven-year contract, with a 3.25 percent raise in the first year, 2 percent in the second, 1 percent in the third and no wage increases for the remaining four years. During years four through seven, hourly wage increases would be replaced with lump-sum annual bonuses of up to 5 percent of wages if company revenue hits targets set by management.

US Steel also wants to establish a new tier of new hires who will be paid less and receive fewer benefits, along with cuts to retiree health benefits implemented last month, cuts to hours and elimination of overtime pay.

In a September 1 memo to workers announcing the strike vote, the USW wrote, “The local leadership will then return to Pittsburgh [after the vote] to try to finalize a deal before we take any strike action.”

Today, a memo was released on the union’s website that announced that it would seek strike authorization votes from steelworkers at ArcelorMittal, but only if “other strategic alternatives to bring the company to its senses are unsuccessful.”

The USW has spent decades colluding with the steel bosses and has no intention of obeying the strike mandate by the union membership. In 2015, the USW forced workers at US Steel and ArcelorMittal to stay on the job past the contract expiration while it deliberately isolated locked-out workers at Allegheny Technologies.

Rather than opposing the relentless attack on workers’ jobs, living standards and working conditions, the USW has long promoted the lie that the enemy of steelworkers in the US and Canada is their class brothers and sisters in China and other countries. The aim of this is to prevent any unified struggle by metal workers around the world and instead to line up North American workers behind trade war and ultimately world war.

The union bureaucrats who have carried out betrayal after betrayal are compensated handsomely for their services to the ruling elite. Leo Gerard, president of the USW and one of the most vocal supporters of Trump’s trade war agenda, pocketed $213,000 in 2015. This does not include the additional income drawn from positions on various corporate and government boards, as well as investments on Wall Street.

This is why rank-and-file steelworkers must take the conduct of this fight into their own hands. Workers at every mill and facility should elect rank-and-file factory committees that will stand up to both the company and the union. These committees should establish lines of communication between all USS and AM workers and formulate their own demands.

These should include:

- Election of representatives to attend all negotiations and livestream talks to all workers.
- Reassert the principle of “No contract, no work” and prepare immediate strike action at US Steel, ArcelorMittal and the whole steel industry;
- A 40 percent across-the-board wage increase, the abolition of all tiers, and the shortening of the workweek with no loss of pay;
- Full funding of health care and retirement benefits;
- Workers’ control over production to stop speedup and unsafe conditions.

These committees must fan out to other sections of workers in the US and internationally, including workers at United Parcel Service, US Postal Service, Amazon, teachers, autoworkers and others, to prepare a general strike to defend the social rights of the working class.

This industrial counteroffensive must be combined with a political offensive to fight for a workers’ government and a socialist program, including the transformation of the global steel industry into a public enterprise democratically controlled and collectively owned by the working class.

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