

# Thousands of ArcelorMittal steelworkers in US cast unanimous strike vote

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On Monday, steelworkers at ArcelorMittal's plants across the US voted unanimously to strike. In Burns Harbor, Indiana, members of United Steelworkers union (USW) Local 6787 packed the union hall throughout the day. Other locations throughout the US reporting unanimous votes on Monday included Riverdale, Illinois; East Chicago, Indiana; Columbus, Ohio; and Weirton, West Virginia.

The USW declared a unanimous strike authorization vote among members of its 13 locals nationwide Tuesday morning. This follows unanimous strike votes by workers at US Steel earlier this month.

A USW news release announcing the tally stated, "although the union would prefer to resolve the outstanding issues without a work stoppage, USW members have delivered a clear message through their overwhelming support of strike authorization."

As was the case with the US Steel vote, the USW has no desire to strike against the corporation. Its intent all along was to use these votes to allow workers to release pent-up anger while the union collaborates with the steel companies to push through another sellout contract.

An estimated 15,000 workers are covered by the contract currently being negotiated with ArcelorMittal. Another 16,000 workers are under the USW contract with Pittsburgh-based US Steel.

ArcelorMittal's proposal on September 7 demanded wage cuts, cuts to vacation pay and the elimination of profit-sharing bonuses for newer workers. It also would increase out-of-pocket health care costs, which could cost steelworkers \$9,300 over the three years the contract.

Although the company as a whole has increased its earnings over the past three years, ArcelorMittal claims its US operations have not been profitable.

Management insists that workers must take cuts for the company to maintain profitability in the face of competition from mini-mills and domestic competitors.

The unanimous strike votes among steelworkers come at a time when workers throughout the US and internationally—teachers, construction, logistics, hotel, transport, energy and autoworkers—have displayed increasing militancy in the face of drastic cuts to their living standards and ballooning wealth among the richest layers of society.

Lewis Graff, a steelworker from Indiana, told the *Northwest Indiana Times* last week, "We steelworkers face death, injury and a harsh work environment on a daily basis. Don't cut our healthcare. We need that when we can no longer breathe right from ammonia fumes or other harsh chemicals we're inhaling. Don't cut our retirement. Most of us have devoted our entire lives to this mill, we would like to enjoy our last few years outside the plant. Don't cut our pay. We are not the unskilled workers you think us to be. It takes education to run your mills at the capacity they are running."

The dangerous conditions described by Graff were echoed by steelworkers on social media. Commenting on the NWI Times Steel News page, a worker painted a picture of deadly conditions: "You climb into pits of sludge in several hundred degrees areas and drag out razor blade sharp straps covered in grease for 8 hrs...bust buildup on troughs of 2700 degree iron flowing into ladles...climb 300 feet with rotten plated stairs and tell us how high the pay is. Watch brothers and sisters die young from cancer and diseases caused by the hazards of the jobs and tell us how our insurance is too good."

There is plenty of money to meet steelworkers' demands for higher pay, good health care benefits, safe

working conditions, and time off to enjoy leisure with their families. Luxembourg-based ArcelorMittal is the world's leading steel producer and raked in more than \$8 billion in gross profits in 2017. ArcelorMittal's CEO and chairman, Lakshmi Mittal, has a net worth of over \$17 billion, according to Forbes.com.

The steelworkers who have voted unanimously to strike against these billion-dollar corporations are seeking a way to fight back. But they will not find any means to battle through the USW, which has spent decades collaborating with the steel bosses in the destruction of workers' jobs and living standards.

For all of its posturing, the USW has not put forth a single counterproposal since negotiations began in Pittsburgh on July 9. Just days before the strike votes were called for US Steel, the union announced it would keep workers on the job without a new contract past the negotiation deadline of September 1.

During the 2015 contract struggle, the USW opposed any unified struggle by US Steel, ArcelorMittal, and specialty steel producer Allegheny Technologies (ATI). When ATI locked out 2,200 workers, the USW refused to call a strike by ArcelorMittal and US Steel workers to defend them.

The USW forced workers at US Steel and ArcelorMittal to continue to work under dangerous conditions and without a contract for seven months until a sellout deal was reached in the first half of 2016. Steelworkers went back to work to face layoffs, more-dangerous conditions, wage freezes and benefit cuts. The contracts also created lower tiers of workers by expanding the use of contract workers, who have fewer protections and benefits, thereby dividing the unity of the workers in the plants.

The USW claimed concessions were needed to protect their jobs from foreign competition. The USW has long peddled the lie that workers in China and Europe are to blame for steel mill closures and falling living standards. All the while, the USW pushed through concessions contracts that filled the coffers of corporate bank accounts and Wall Street and lined the pockets of the union bureaucracy.

USW President Leo Gerard earned \$213,000 in 2015, excluding income from positions on corporate and government boards and Wall Street investments. Gerard is also one of the most vocal supporters of Trump's trade war against China. This vile nationalism

is aimed at preventing a unified struggle of metal workers internationally while lining up North American workers for new wars.

The USW has every intention of ignoring the strike mandate by the membership. That is why steelworkers should form rank-and-file committees in every mill and workplace to set a date for an all-out strike by ArcelorMittal, US Steel, ATI and other steelworkers.

At the same time, in every department and shift, workers should elect the most trusted workers to monitor negotiations and report all details to the membership. No backroom deals and sellouts!

These committees, democratically controlled by rank-and-file workers themselves, should outline their own list of demands. These should include:

- An immediate 40 percent across-the board raise and restoration of COLA payments.
- All health care and pension benefits to be paid for by the company, regardless of labor grade.
- A reduction of hours with no reduction in pay.
- Workers' control over production, including output speed and health and safety.

The committees must link up with other steelworkers across the US and around the world to wage a common struggle against the corporations and the nationalist trade unions. They must coordinate their struggles by joining hands internationally with workers around the world to prepare for a general strike. This must be combined with a political movement to fight for a socialist reorganization of economic life in the US and internationally, including the transformation of the steel industry into a public enterprise collectively owned and democratically controlled by the working class.

We encourage steelworkers interested in a real, fighting perspective and program for the working class to contact the *World Socialist Web Site*.



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