

United Steelworkers union claims it is preparing to strike ArcelorMittal

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Weeks have passed since over 30,000 steel workers passed unanimous strike votes earlier this month at US Steel and ArcelorMittal plants throughout the United States. Meanwhile, the United Steelworkers union (USW) has kept workers in the dark and laboring under an extended contract to bide time to work out a concessions deal with the two major corporations.

The contracts covering an estimated 16,000 workers at US Steel and 15,000 ArcelorMittal workers expired on August 31 and have been under negotiation since July.

The USW announced Wednesday that it is preparing for its members to strike the US locations of ArcelorMittal, the world's largest steel company. Since Wednesday, the union has begun to distribute picket duty surveys to its members but USW officials have stressed that the preparations are not a declaration of a strike.

USW Local 6787 President Pete Trinidad told the *Chicago Tribune* Wednesday that USW members at ArcelorMittal plants in northwest Indiana will “begin putting together shanties for picket lines in the event of inclement weather, gathering wood for the barrels used to warm up picketers in the cold and will be discussing rules and regulations” in the coming days.

Mainstream news outlets were unable to ignore the mounting anger of steelworkers after unanimous strike votes passed at ArcelorMittal plants across the US early last week. A video of two US Steel workers interviewed by Vice News has over 116,000 views on Twitter. National Public Radio's “All Things Considered” segment featured an interview on Monday, which pointed to the growing anger of ArcelorMittal workers at falling wages and rising profits, and the fear among corporate heads that the steel profit bonanza could soon come to an end, faced with the combined

threat of falling domestic demand, counter-tariffs and workers' growing wage demands.

In spite of the populist posturing of President Trump, including his delivering a speech at US Steel in Granite City, Illinois, in July, the 25 percent tariffs on steel and aluminum imports rolled out in June were never meant to benefit the working class. On the contrary, they were aimed at transferring a large amount of wealth from the working class to the major shareholders in the steel and metals industries by pitting workers in the US against their brothers and sisters around the world. This involves forcing workers to accept even more givebacks in wages, benefits and work rules to lower the cost of domestic-made steel.

Faced with the growing militancy of steelworkers who want to recoup decades of USW-backed concessions, the union first called strike votes and is now going through the motions of preparing for a walkout. The USW, however, has no intention of leading a serious strike. If they are forced to call a strike, USW President Leo Gerard and his army of union functionaries will do everything to isolate the struggle and beat back the resistance of rank-and-file workers to further concessions, which would benefit the company and the USW bureaucracy itself.

This is exactly what the USW did during the last contract negotiations when they ordered US Steel and ArcelorMittal workers to stay on the job, even as ATI workers were locked out, before they signed sellout deals at all three steelmakers. The USW has not called a national strike since the 1986 US Steel strike, which the union betrayed.

Over the last four decades, USW officials have collaborated in the destruction of the jobs, living standards and working conditions of hundreds of thousands of steelworkers. During the same period, the

USW bureaucrats at the union's headquarters in Pittsburgh collaborated with Wall Street asset strippers, like Trump's commerce secretary, Wilbur Ross, to restructure the industry at the expense of workers, their families and communities.

In its announcement, the USW said it "remain[s] hopeful that management will change direction before forcing us into a labor dispute."

The steel bosses have only been emboldened by the efforts of the USW to block a strike. US Steel is demanding a six-year contract that will increase healthcare costs and eat up the company's proposed minimal wage increases of 4 percent in the first year and just 2 percent in each year after that.

ArcelorMittal is also demanded sweeping concessions, including wage givebacks and cuts to vacation pay, as well as the elimination of profit-sharing bonuses for newer workers. Out-of-pocket health care costs will increase by up to \$9,300 over the three years of the contract.

Combined, the two companies made over \$9 billion in gross profits in 2017, thanks to the USW pushing through a deep concessions contract in the first half of 2016. Gerard and other USW bureaucrats justified this by telling workers that they needed to sacrifice to keep their jobs. Immediately after the contracts were forced through, USW worked with the steel corporations to lay off thousands of workers and idle mills, creating dangerous conditions that led to several unnecessary injuries and deaths.

Officials in Indiana's Democratic Party-controlled Lake and Porter counties, both of which house US Steel and ArcelorMittal operations, have declared their support for whatever concessions the corporations and USW decide to force upon workers. Officials in Lake County, home of Gary, Indiana, expressed their desire to avoid a struggle like the 1986 US Steel strike, when the corporation brought a shipment of tear gas and a grenade launcher into USS Gary Works and Democratic Mayor Richard Hatcher deployed a special detachment of police to intervene in the strike.

Steelworkers are determined to fight but they need a new organization of struggle and a new political strategy. Steelworkers across the US must form rank-and-file committees in every plant to organize a struggle, independent of the pro-company USW. These committees should draw up with own list of demands

and prepare a strike to fight for it. 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.

Steelworkers should reject the nationalist poison long peddled by the USW to provide a cover for its collusion with the steel corporations and divide American steelworkers from their class brothers and sisters in Europe, Asia, Latin America and elsewhere. Instead, rank-and-file committees should fight for a unified struggle of steelworkers around the world against the giant global corporations and the big business politicians they control.



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