

As union ignores strike authorization votes

Tubing company locks out steelworkers in Trenton, Georgia

Shelley Connor
12 October 2018

Fifty-six workers at the Bull Moose Steel Tubing plant in Trenton, Georgia, have been locked out by the company since August 22, their posts filled by strikebreakers. This is the first lockout in the state of Georgia in 30 years.

Prior to the lockout, negotiations between the United Steelworkers (USW) and Bull Moose had dragged on for seven months. At the heart of the workers' complaints is an offer that would give them a paltry \$3,000 wage increase over three years, which would be eaten up by \$1,000 in healthcare premium increases and a 50 percent hike in deductibles.

Workers at the Trenton plant are also angry because they are already paid less and given inferior insurance coverage than workers at Bull Moose's other sites. Many of the workers at Bull Moose Trenton have worked for the company for 20 years or more. Several have told the local news media that the company's ultimatum, along with the lockout, have soured them on a company for which they once worked proudly and loyally.

The dispute has highlighted a number of crucial points for workers, particularly in the steel industry. Trump's 25 percent tariffs against foreign steelmakers, which have been fully supported by the USW, have boosted steel prices and contributed to a 30 percent increase in profits. In addition, steel companies have benefited from Trump's corporate tax cuts and deregulation campaign. Far from using any of this windfall to raise wages and benefits, however, the steel bosses have doubled down on demands for sweeping givebacks from workers.

In addition to small producers like Bull Moose, the largest steelmakers—US Steel and ArcelorMittal—are

demanding historic concessions from 31,000 steelworkers throughout the US. These include demands for continued wage freezes, the introduction of multiple wage and benefit tiers, increasing out-of-pocket healthcare costs and reduction of retiree benefits.

Although US Steel and ArcelorMittal workers voted unanimously to strike, the USW has kept them on the job for more than a month after the expiration of their previous contracts on September 1 and is doing everything possible to prevent a strike. At the same time, the USW is keeping workers in the dark about negotiations and trying to chloroform them with text messages, which provide no details about the supposed "progress" at the bargaining table.

The America-First nationalism, which was championed by the USW and other unions, well before Trump, has always served to conceal the savage class war the corporations have been waging against workers in the US and around the world. Far from uniting US workers with their international class brothers and sisters to fight the global metal-making corporations, the USW has insisted that US workers sacrifice everything in order to make "their" steel companies more "competitive" and profitable.

This entailed the abandonment of strikes and any resistance to the corporations and the collusion of the unions in the relentless destruction of workers' jobs, living standards and working conditions. The USW and other unions have abandoned any of the functions long associated with the unions and have become management's enforcers for cost-cutting, speed up and dangerous working conditions.

The USW has fully embraced Trump's claim that

trade war against China and other countries is a critical component of “national security” and reviving US manufacturing to wage war against major economic competitors. This is a signal that the USW and other unions will do everything to tie workers to the US war machine as it prepares for world war.

In comments to the local media, Joey Casey, the president of the USW Local 13679 in Trenton, told reporters that Bull Moose’s demands were an insult after decades of voluntary “belt-tightening” on the part of union members. To be clear, these “voluntary” concessions were forced upon workers by the USW, which used the threat of offshoring operations to coerce workers into accepting concessions.

While hundreds of thousands of steelworkers have lost their jobs since the mid-1970s, the compensation packets for union bureaucrats have soared into six-digit ranges. USW President Leo Gerard pockets \$213,000, plus other reported income from his seats on corporate boards, investment funds and other business opportunities. The USW developed the closest relations with Wall Street and corporate asset strippers like billionaire Wilbur Ross, now Trump’s commerce secretary.

While the USW is sitting on a Strike and Defense Fund worth hundreds of millions of dollars, the union is paying a piddling \$225 per member per week to the local, which distributes the money to locked out workers “as needed.”

The USW’s membership numbers 850,000 workers throughout North America, and their reach extends beyond the steel industry into oil refineries, paper mills and chemical plants. This number represents an immense amount of power, which the USW is purposely keeping caged. Should those 850,000 workers strike, it would effectively shut down a wide swath of manufacturing capabilities. That is the last thing highly paid union executives like Gerard, who function as tools of management, want.

What the Bull Moose lockout announces to American workers is that both the unions and the president’s trade tariffs are dead-ends. Workers must recognize the immense power they hold in their hands and build rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, to unify their struggles against attacks on wages, benefits and working conditions, and against the drive to war. The enemy of Bull Moose and other steelworkers are

not the workers of Asia, Europe or Latin America—who are facing the same attacks—but the global corporations and their servants in the trade unions. That is why workers around the world must unite against the capitalist profit system.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact