

# Vote “no” on the USW-US Steel concessions contract!

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After more than three months of negotiations, the United Steelworkers (USW) union has agreed to a pro-company deal that would force US Steel workers to hand more sacrifices to steel companies that are flush with profits and cash.

While the USW is concealing the full scope of its givebacks, it has been reported that the tentative agreement will include an insulting 14 percent wage increase over four years—barely above the annual inflation rate of 2.9 percent, which could go higher during the life of the contract—for workers who have already suffered a three-year wage freeze. This is in addition to expected cuts to health care and other benefits for current workers and retirees.

In other words, the USW is dangling a \$4,000 signing bonus to get workers to swallow another deal that will eat away at their living standards, even though US Steel saw a 60 percent rise in profits in the June quarter. If workers cannot make substantial gains now, then they never will.

Rank-and-file workers must mobilize now to oppose the USW’s efforts to keep workers in the dark and rush through this sellout agreement. In every steel mill and facility, workers should elect rank-and-file committees to demand access to the full contract—not just the “highlights” the USW hands out to sell the deal—and a full two weeks to study and discuss it among themselves.

These committees should establish lines of communication with workers at every US Steel facility, as well as ArcelorMittal and other steelmakers, and prepare a common fight to defeat this sellout and prepare a national strike to win their own demands.

In a display of the growing militancy among wide layers of workers across the US, Canada and around the world, US Steel workers cast unanimous strike votes

during the first week of September. This was followed, two weeks later, by a unanimous strike vote at ArcelorMittal USA. Joint action by 31,000 workers at the two largest raw steel producers in the US would have an immediate and powerful effect and would inspire tens of millions of other workers—at UPS, Amazon, teachers, autoworkers and others—to take up their own fight against declining real wages, job overloading and the destruction of health care and pensions.

The biggest obstacle to unifying the working class is the USW, which long ago abandoned the most basic responsibilities unions once performed. It does not unite workers, it divides them by tiers, between factories, companies and countries. It does not oppose management’s dictatorship on the shop floor; the USW enforces it.

The USW has not called a national strike since the US Steel (USX) strike in 1986-7. This has given the steel bosses a free hand to destroy the jobs, wages, health care and pensions of workers, and to reintroduce conditions of industrial slavery, including speed-up and grueling schedules, that have led to a wave of injuries and deaths.

During the 2015-16 contract season, specialty steelmaker Allegheny Technologies locked out 2,000 steelworkers. The USW refused to call out USS and AM workers to defend these workers, and after isolating them for more than eight months, the USW signed a deal which allowed ATI to cut 25 percent of the workforce and impose brutal conditions on those who remained, including forced overtime in increasingly deadly workplaces. This sellout was then used as the precedent to push through wage freezes and other concessions at USS and AM.

Once again, the USW is trying to isolate steelworkers

from each other. First it signed a sellout contract with Cleveland-Cliffs that will keep real wages flat and cut into health benefits. Now it is pushing for concessions at US Steel while keeping ArcelorMittal waiting for the hammer to fall.

US Steel workers can defeat this divide-and-conquer strategy by rejecting this deal and fighting to develop a common struggle by all steelworkers, from Cleveland Cliffs, USS and AM to National Grid, Bull Moose Tube, and other embattled workers.

Steelworkers should form rank-and-file factory committees to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the USW. Instead of accepting this sellout, workers should formulate their own demands and prepare a nationwide strike.

These demands should include:

- An immediate 40 percent 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, and the replacement of the shop floor dictatorship with industrial democracy.

While workers have suffered terribly from decades of USW-backed concessions, the same cannot be said of the business managers who run the union. Despite a massive decline in membership, the USW controls assets of nearly \$1 billion (\$963,359,031). It hands out over \$83 million in salaries and other disbursements to USW officers, administrators and staff.

Dozens of USW executives, including President Leo Gerard, make an excess of \$200,000 in annual salaries, putting them in the top 2 percent of income earners in the US. After investing their pay and other sources of income from business connections, there is little doubt that Gerard and several other USW executives have become millionaires. In other words, they are on the opposite side of the class divide from the workers they falsely claim to represent.

The global financial crash and the Great Recession was used to demand more concessions. The USW said such sacrifices were only temporary and workers would recoup their losses once profits were high again. Far from sharing their wealth, the Wall Street banks, which were bailed out with taxpayer money, are demanding that even more profits be sweated out of workers.

In a comment to Reuters, one financial analyst complained that US Steel had the “lowest dividend yield among major rivals” and that the steel companies should pour more money into dividends and stock buybacks to enrich the top shareholders.

The USW has been one of the most vocal proponents of the Trump administration's trade war policies, particularly against China. But who has benefited from the trade war measures? While it has led to a spike in profits, the steel companies are doubling down and, with the assistance of the USW, demanding more sacrifice.

Economic nationalism has and always will be a way to swindle workers into believing they have more in common with their “own” corporate bosses than with their class brothers and sisters around the world. The USW has imposed decades of concessions in the name of making US corporations more “competitive” and profitable.

Even more deadly for workers is that trade war is the prelude for real war. The USW insists that American-made steel is critical to prepare for war with China. But a clash with nuclear-armed China or Russia would mean the end of civilization.

The enemies of American steelworkers are not steelworkers in China, Latin America, or Europe. These are our allies. US and Canadian workers must unite with workers around the world against the relentless attack on jobs and living standards by the global steel and energy conglomerates.

The industrial mobilization of the working class must be combined with a new political strategy in opposition to both big-business parties and based on the international unity of the working class and the fight for socialism. This is the only way to oppose the relentless wage-cutting demands of the transnational corporations, to unite the entire working class against war and transform the steel industry into a public enterprise under the democratic control and collective ownership of the working class.



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