“Conditions are worse today than they were 40 years ago”

Pittsburgh-area workers speak out on USW sellout deal with US Steel

A WSWS reporting team
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This week some 16,000 US Steel workers across the country will be receiving mail-in ballots and a “summary” of the tentative agreement for a new labor contract, which the United Steelworkers (USW) union reached with the company on October 15.

The USW has kept workers in the dark about the details of the negotiations with US Steel executives in Pittsburgh since they began in July. Now, they are attempting to force a concessions contract through without giving workers a chance to read through the entire contract and provide time for the rank-and-file to discuss it among themselves.

After the USW announced that it reached a tentative agreement, the *WSWS Steelworker Newsletter* warned: “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.

“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.”

At a shift change at the US Steel’s Edgar Thompson mill in the Pittsburgh suburb of Braddock, Pennsylvania, supporters distributed copies of the *WSWS Steelworker Newsletter* and spoke to workers about the sellout deal. There are about 800 steelworkers at this mill, which is one of the four Mon Valley Works facilities in western Pennsylvania, with an annual raw steel production capability of 2.9 million net tons. The mill was built in 1875 by steel magnate Andrew Carnegie and played a central role in some of the most violent labor upheavals in US history, including the Homestead strike of 1892 and the Great Steel Strike of 1919.

After the contract between the USW and US Steel and ArcelorMittal expired last month, workers at both steelmakers across the US voted unanimously to strike against the concessions demanded by both corporations, in a display of the growing militancy of large sections of the international working class. Since calling the strike votes, the USW has ignored the workers’ will, refusing to call a strike and isolating workers from their brothers and sisters in the US and around the world in an attempt to break their militancy.

During the shift change, the vast majority of workers present were contract laborers or members of non-USW unions, such as boilermakers, bricklayers, rail workers, and carpenters. Decades of USW-backed concessions have allowed the steel companies to massively expand the use of outside contractors as a way of introducing the “gig” economy to the steel industry, casualizing the labor force and attacking the living standards of workers.

Asked what he thought of the proposed contract, a repairman explained, “I think the company got the better end of the deal.”

A steelworker with 18 years of experience said working at a blast furnace is the “hardest, most difficult work a man could ever have. If anything, the situation with US Steel right now is not the way I would like to have it. You know you work for a corrupt corporation, but we have to provide for our family even if we don’t want to work under these conditions. Of course, we want a greater wage and better benefits. We would also like time off because we don’t get enough.”

A contractor who works as a mechanic told the WSWS, “We’re in the same situation. They give us 1 percent as a pay increase and then they charge us an additional 5 percent for health care. It’s corporate greed at its best.” Another contract worker expressed his solidarity with the production workers, saying, “If I see a picket line, I’m not crossing

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that."

After a discussion about the historic decline in workers' wages since 1973, the veteran worker responded, "It's true that conditions are worse now than 40 years ago. When we were kids growing up, the steelworkers would vote for a Democrat. Now, they're voting for Donald Trump because they feel like Donald Trump could give them more." The worker acknowledged that neither party offered the working class any way forward and both parties defended the rich. "Something big is going to happen," he said referring to growing social anger, "It has to."

The USW headquarters in downtown Pittsburgh, just a few miles away from Braddock, Homestead and dozens of other ravaged mill towns, has long been the center of a conspiracy against steelworkers. Its highly paid executives, including President Leo Gerard, are paid large salaries to push through contracts that defend the profits of the steel companies at the expense of the workers they falsely claim to represent.

The USW has been one of the most stalwart backers of Trump's trade war measures and steel and aluminum tariffs against China. The union's decades-long xenophobic and racist attacks on foreign workers and promotion of American chauvinism, coupled with its collusion in the deindustrialization of the region, contributed to the poisonous atmosphere that led to the anti-Semitic rampage at a Jewish synagogue in Pittsburgh on October 27. The USW is now aligned with Trump's nationalist campaign to prepare US industry to wage war against China.

In the face of the growing militancy of workers in steel and other industry, the USW is doing everything it can to prevent a strike by US Steel and ArcelorMittal workers, which would expose that the enemy is not workers of other countries by the very same capitalist exploiters and big business politicians the unions are aligned with.

While the steel companies have reaped enormous profits from Trump's protectionist measures and corporate tax cuts, this has not improved conditions for workers. On the contrary, US Steel and ArcelorMittal have doubling down on their concession demands. This underscores the fact that nationalism has always been used to dupe workers into accepting ever greater sacrifices in the name of making their "own" companies competitive and profitable, while blocking US workers from uniting with their class brothers and sisters throughout the world in a common fight against the globally organized capitalist firms.

Last week, the *Northwest Indiana Times* reported that ArcelorMittal USA intends to push through a similar concessions contract. ArcelorMittal, the world's largest steelmaker made net profits of $3.1 billion in the first half of 2018 and is offering nothing but a 4 percent raise in the first year, 3.5 percent in 2019 and 2020, and 3 percent in 2021, as well as $4,000 signing bonuses.

In other words, this is the best it's going to get for steelworkers. Not only will they have to slave away under deadly conditions for wages that are barely above the rate of inflation, but it will be only a matter of time before the steel bosses and the USW demand a new round of concessions to force workers to pay for a new global economic downturn. Already, Wall Street is demanding that even more money be squeezed out of workers to pay for stock repurchases and higher dividends that only benefit the wealthiest investors.

The *WSWS Steelworker Newsletter* calls for workers at US Steel and ArcelorMittal to elect rank-and-file committees in every mill and facility. These committees should establish lines of communication with each other and draw up their own list of demands based on what workers need, not what is supposedly affordable for the steel giants. These should include a 40 percent wage increase for all workers, the restoration of COLA, and fully funded health care and pension benefits. To oppose speed-up and dangerous conditions, these committees should fight for a reduction of work hours with no loss of pay and the extension of industrial democracy through workers' control of production.

These committees should demand access to the full contract, not just the bogus summary, which the USW uses to hide the truth, and rank-and-file oversight of the voting process, including that the ballots be submitted in person and counted in front of representatives elected by the rank and file.

These committees should work to organize strike action by workers at US Steel, ArcelorMittal and the rest of the steel industry and draw in the widest layers of the working class, such as UPS workers, teachers, autoworkers, and Amazon workers in preparation for a general strike. This industrial offensive must be linked up with the development of a powerful political movement of the working class to fight for a socialist alternative to the profit system, which would include the transformation of the banks and corporations into publicly owned enterprises that will serve the needs of the working class, not private profit.

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