Aluminum workers vote to strike Arconic-Alcoa

Steve Filips
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Thousands of aluminum workers at Arconic and Alcoa plants in Iowa, Indiana, upstate New York and other locations are voting for strike action to oppose demands for wages, medical and retirement benefit concessions. Anger is building up among workers who have been kept on the job by the United Steelworkers union for more than two weeks after the contract for more than 6,000 workers expired on May 15.

This is the first contract for workers since Alcoa, the former Aluminum Corporation of America, separated its aluminum, titanium and nickel operations and renamed it Arconic in 2016. Arconic supplies metal products to the automotive, aerospace and oil and gas industries, and sold the flammable aluminum cladding involved in the horrific June 2017 Grenfell Towers fire in London, England.

Workers at USW Local 104 in Evansville, Indiana, which has 1,250 members at the Alcoa Warrick smelting plant, voted last week to strike. So did 1,900 workers at the Arconic plant in Bettendorf, Iowa. On May 24, 137 Arconic and 357 Alcoa workers in Massena, New York, voted to strike. The strike vote of the 750 USW Local 115 members at the Arconic plant in Lafayette, Indiana, will vote on June 6.

USW officials have made it clear they have no intention of calling a strike despite the intransigence of the corporation. Mark Goodfellow, president of USW Local 420A in Massena, New York, said, “Listen, we’re not going in there wanting to strike, or any kind of work stoppage at all, period. We want to continue to negotiate.”

Last week, the USW announced the retirement of long-time union president Leo Gerard, who spent decades colluding with the corporations to slash the jobs and living standards of workers in steel and other metal industries. Gerard, who took over as president in 2001, has long led the USW’s promotion of economic nationalism and has been a backer of the Trump administration’s trade war against China. Gerard, who is Canadian, has promoted American-first nationalism as a means of concealing the endless imposition of concessions by the union in the name of making US corporations more competitive.

Gerard is being replaced by Tom Conway, former union vice president and lead negotiator on the Alcoa-Arconic contract negotiations. Conway is infamous for isolating and betraying 2,200 workers in six states locked out by Allegheny Technologies Inc. (ATI) in 2015-16. Conway also sold out the strike by oil refinery workers in 2015.

The USW has also isolated more the 1,000 Canadian workers who have been locked out by Alcoa since January 2018 at its ABI plant in Becancour, Quebec. The ABI plant is a joint venture between Alcoa, with 75 percent ownership, and the conglomerate Rio Tinto, headquartered in London and Melbourne.

The nature of the work at these industrial operations is inherently dangerous and physically exhausting. Elliot Bailey, a 25-year-old worker, was severally burned in an accident at the Alcoa Warrick aluminum smelting operation in Evansville, Indiana, on April 28. The seriousness of his injuries required that he be airlifted to the University of Louisville Hospital Burn Center for treatment. A GoFundMe page has been established by Elliot’s mother, so far raising $8,340. Inexplicably, there hasn’t been any mention of the accident by the USW.

This accident exposes the increasingly dangerous conditions workers are falling victim to as the USW backs the unrelenting drive to increase profit. For its part, the Trump administration has curtailed the disclosure of accident information by the agency

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charged with overseeing workplace safety—the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA).

Comments that reveal the widespread desire of workers to unify came from the Davenport, Iowa, USW Local 105 Facebook page, where Brian K King said, “I’m at a non-union plant. If you guys accept what the greedy money grabbers want to give you, it will only get worse next time and with their execs taking millions of $$ for themselves at our loss.” Brian added, “I know it will be tough on many if there is a strike, but if you give in to them you will regret it and there will be no going back.”

Workers should take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the USW by forming rank-and-file committees to fight for a nationwide strike and the mobilization of the broadest support in the working class for this struggle.

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