

UAW isolates striking metal workers near Pittsburgh

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Workers at Langeloth Metallurgical, 40 miles west of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, have been on strike for nearly five months to protect seniority rights and job safety. While the workers remain determined, the United Auto Workers union has isolated the 90 strikers, giving management a free hand to hire strikebreakers and continue production.

Langeloth Metallurgical facility processes 35 million tons a year of molybdenum, an element used as an alloy in steel production to increase its strength. Working under dangerously high temperatures, workers “roast” the molybdenum in four multiple-hearth furnaces converting it into powder and briquettes for the steel and chemical industries.

The parent company, Denver, Colorado-based Thompson Creek Metals, has gone through a series of corporate changes. Facing near bankruptcy, Thompson—which owns gold, copper and molybdenum mines in Idaho and the Canadian province of British Columbia, was taken over by Canadian mining company Centerra Gold for \$1.1 billion in shares and cash, including paying off Thompson’s nearly \$900 million debt. Centerra CEO Scott Perry pocketed \$3.4 million last year.

Workers on the picket line spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about the strike and the blackout of information from the UAW. John, a worker with 16 years, said, “This company has been two steps ahead of us all the time. We want to do something, and they have already done it.”

Forced to survive on the UAW’s miserly \$250 a week strike benefits, many workers have taken other jobs. Several who spoke asked that their names or photos not be used out of fear of retaliation from their new employers.

“It was a black Christmas,” a worker told the WSWS.

“There were a lot of things my children were not able to get.”

“We all have children,” said another worker with 10 years in the plant. “Everyone on the picket line has children. This has been really hard on us and our families. I had to take a \$6.00 an hour pay cut and I’m on a 90-day probation at my new job, without any medical care.” It would take him two years on his new job before he earns what he was making at Langeloth Metallurgical, the worker explained.

“They won’t talk with us. We can’t get any answers. The union is not telling us anything. This is supposed to be a union shop and they are bringing in non-union people to do our jobs. How are they allowed to do this?”

The workers at the plant produce molybdenum, rhenium and nickel, which are used for the making of specialty steel for everything from hand tools to airplane parts.

“The company even collects the sulfur gas,” explained one of the pickets. “It is released during the smelting process and they make sulfuric acid with it.”

John continued, “They have all these permanent replacement workers and we can’t even collect unemployment. The union has called it an economic strike, but it is really about seniority.

“If a department isn’t doing well, they want to be able to close it down and lay off those people, while people with lower seniority keep working. They are forcing older workers to be pokers, which is the most dangerous job.”

All of the workers on the picket line agreed that seniority is the major issue. The company wants to get rid of the older, higher paid workers by forcing them to do the hardest and most dangerous jobs.

“I have 10 years,” explained one of the pickets. “I

haven't been a poker for five years. Usually that is a job given to the newer employees. Now they were forcing people with twice my seniority to be pokers. They are sending people who are 60 years old to poke the roasters."

As the name implies, the poker has to keep the fires burning hot in the massive furnaces and roasters used to melt the metals out of the ore. It is the most labor-intensive and dangerous job, exposing workers to extreme temperatures. The melting point of molybdenum is 4,753 Fahrenheit; rhenium melts at the even hotter 5,766 degrees, while nickel melts at 2,650 degrees Fahrenheit.

"We voted down the contract three times," said Delane, who has 14 years in the mill. "I worked 27 years at Weirton Steel. (a nearby steel mill that is now closed). I was planning to retire in May. I could have voted for this contract and just get out, but I am standing up for the younger employees."

The company has been cutting jobs and forcing the remaining workers to do all the work. "All last summer we were working 60 hours a week," continued Delane. "If someone went on vacation, they didn't have anyone to back fill them. A lot of people get shoulder and back injuries here.

"They refused to negotiate for months and months and the company just basically started implementing their last offer."

Workers pointed to the sale of the company to Centerra and the hiring of Stan Ledzinski in 2017 to head the human resources department as a turning point in labor relations. Before being hired by Langeloth Metallurgical Ledzinski worked for a nearby electrical manufacturer where he also led the assault on workers.

"They actually fired a dead guy," explained Delane. "This is how bad they have gotten with us. He hadn't shown up for work, we were texting and calling his home but got no answer. The company sent him a letter telling him he was fired. He had worked here for 12 years and they didn't bother to send someone to his home to check on him, or reach out to his emergency contacts, they just fired him."

Pickets expressed their anger at the UAW, which has left them isolated and in the dark. Referring to the ongoing corruption scandal in the UAW, one picket said, "These guys are taking all this cash and they are doing nothing for us. They are building resorts in

California and homes in Florida, while they won't tell us anything.

The UAW, which is sitting on top of \$1 billion in assets, has a long history of betraying strikes and colluding with corporate management to destroy the jobs and living standards of the workers it falsely claims to represent.

If this strike is not to be isolated and defeated, then workers will have to take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands by organizing a rank-and-file strike committee, independent of the corrupt UAW, to fight to mobilize the broadest support among workers throughout the Pittsburgh area to stop the strikebreaking operation, and to defend the jobs and conditions of the workers at Langeloth Metallurgical.



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