Over 400 metalworkers on strike at Constellium aluminum plant in Alabama

Jessica Goldstein
20 December 2020

More than 400 metalworkers have gone on an indefinite strike at the French-owned Constellium aluminum plant in Muscle Shoals, Alabama. The workers, who are organized under the United Steelworkers (USW) union, walked off the job last Tuesday night following an overwhelming strike vote.

The strike was called after negotiations between the USW and Constellium dragged on for "several months" before the contract expired on Nov. 1, according to the *Chattanooga Times Free Press*. Workers are on strike against unfair labor practices and proposed health care cuts. USW District 9 Director Daniel Filippo claimed that Constellium's proposals "would undo decades of progress on issues including safety and seniority to give management 'unchecked authority' to decide who works and when."

Constellium acquired the Muscle Shoals plant from Wise Metals in 2015 through a $1.4 billion takeover of the latter company. Workers at the Muscle Shoals plant produce sheet metal primarily used for beverage cans. The plant manufactures under contracts for highly profitable companies, including Budweiser. Demand for aluminum cans in the beverage industry has increased since the pandemic began, according to Bloomberg.

Workers must look to the outcome of past struggles under the union and learn from its betrayals. The USW forced a five-year concessions agreement through after isolating a courageous strike of 700 Constellium workers, starving them out for nearly one and a half months, at the company's aluminum plant in Ravenswood, West Virginia, in 2012. The strike ended with a contract with wage raises of just 2.5 percent per year and cuts to health care benefits.

After the strike ended, Kyle Lorentzen, then-CEO at the Ravenswood plant, hailed the five-year sellout deal as one that would allow the corporation to continue to extract maximum profits from the labor of the workers. "We believe the new contract provides a solid foundation on which we can continue to build Ravenswood's future," he told the *Charleston Gazette-Mail*. "We appreciate everyone's assistance in getting this contract approved."

In June of this year, a US District Court judge blocked an effort by Constellium to overturn an arbitrator's ruling that prevented the company from making unilateral changes to health care benefits for retirees at the Ravenswood plant.

Leaving their struggle in the hands of the USW will do nothing to win improvements for workers' safety and working conditions. There are countless examples over the past several decades of workers that continue to suffer from work-related health problems, injuries, and death after the union works hand-in-hand with the corporations to push through sellout contracts.

Most recently, 45-year-old steelworker and USW member Troy Allen died while working at US Steel's Gary Works Mill in Gary, Indiana, the circumstances of which US Steel and the USW are colluding to cover up. Neither has the USW done anything to mobilize workers at the mill to stop production against the will of the company in order to halt the spread of COVID-19, which has infected hundreds of workers at the mill.

Workers describe brutal work schedules and dangerous conditions at the Muscle Shoals plant on the job website indeed.com:

"Management and human resources are completely clueless. There's little to no room for growth, if you're not part of the good old boy system consider yourself screwed. I would advice anyone applying to RUN. The company itself has changed ownership 3 times within the last decade."

"Lots of walking and carrying tools for long periods of time. Cumbersome areas to navigate. Slippery floors, nasty air, tight spots to get in. Lots of climbing."

"The company could care less about their employees. We are on a 7 day rotation which means we work 7 in a row just to get 2 days off. I have only had one Christmas Day off in 8 years. They do not let you off for holidays. Not any holidays but management is off for all holidays."

Workers at the plant in Alabama, along with 13,000 of their brothers and sisters at Constellium's 25 plants across the North America, Europe and China, work for low wages under dangerous conditions to line the pockets of the

© World Socialist Web Site

company's executive management and top shareholders. Constellium CEO Jean-Marc Germain was compensated $6,558,230 in the past year, according to wallmine.com. In contrast, some assemblers at the Muscle Shoals plant earn as little as $12.00 per hour.

The USW is once again seeking to isolate the Constellium workers, just as it did in West Virginia eight years ago. During the 2012 strike, the USW did nothing to stop Constellium from hiring hundreds of strikebreakers and private gun-thugs and spending millions to erect barbed wire fences, a helicopter pad and boarded-up windows to intimidate striking workers.

Nor did the union do anything to fight to bring the plant's other 300 workers into the strike, who were forced to continue producing aluminum products which the company shipped out in tractor-trailers throughout the work stoppage, unabated by the USW.

In its most recent betrayal of the working class, the USW, with the Teamsters and other unions, betrayed a 10-month strike of 1,800 Asarco copper mine workers in Arizona and Texas in August. The unions shut down the strike and forced the miners to return to work under management's terms, which included pay cuts, increases to out-of-pocket health care costs and no real improvements to health and safety conditions.

The USW has long used nationalist rhetoric aimed against workers in other countries, particularly China, to convince workers to vote for sellout contracts in the name of keeping plants "competitive" and using economic blackmail by threatening them with job losses in the US if they don't comply.

In reality, it is the capitalist class and its relentless exploitation of the global working class for profit which is the source of unemployment in every country, a point made most clear to masses of workers faced with the ongoing economic crisis spurred on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Workers at Constellium's plants in Europe and China face the same conditions as workers in its North American plants, and instead of allowing themselves to be pitted one against another, workers must fight for international unity in an independent working class struggle against the corporation for their jobs, higher wages, and safe working conditions.

Left to the bankrupt leadership of the USW, the strike will do nothing to harm the profit-making ability of the corporation. Constellium will be allowed to use the other 800 workers at the Muscle Shoals plant to continue production while starving striking workers for weeks and months, unless the workers themselves take the initiative to break the isolation imposed on them.

The Constellium workers will find immense support for their struggle if they seek to strike out an independent path and break out of the grip of the USW and the twin parties of big business. A Facebook post announcing the strike on Dec. 15 by the Shoals Insider News Group received many supportive reactions and comments, with calls of "solidarity," "Stand strong!" and "Standing behind y'all" from other workers.

Striking aluminum workers will find support from teachers in Montgomery, Alabama, who were snubbed at a school board meeting where they protested to demand the right of educators to work remotely and for COVID-19 transparency from the school district. Left in the hands of the USW, however, workers will be isolated from teachers and the many other sections of workers who would be willing to fight with them.

Aluminum workers at Constellium would learn well from the examples of teachers and autoworkers across the world who are linking up independently of the trade unions and capitalist political parties to form rank-and-file committees to save jobs and lives. These committees must be formed not with the aim of pressuring the unions not to accept concessions, because the unions have proven through betrayal after betrayal that they are not organizations that fight for the working class and cannot be reformed.

These rank-and-file committees are new organizations of struggle, by and for the workers themselves, completely independent of the unions and big business parties. They are the framework through which workers will struggle for their demands that they decide democratically, based on what they need and not what the corporations say they can afford. These committees will have the potential to link metal and mining workers across the globe in a struggle to overthrow the capitalist system to place these industries under public control to meet the needs of the global working class, not the profit interests of a few wealthy individuals.

The *World Socialist Web Site* will support workers who want to build these committees in every way possible, and encourages metalworkers who want to learn more to contact us today.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site