

French unions and IndustriALL offer cover up for strangling of Constellium strike in Alabama

Jessica Goldstein
28 December 2020

The indefinite strike of more than 400 metal workers at Constellium’s aluminum rolling plant in Muscle Shoals, Alabama has entered its third week. Since the strike began, the United Steelworkers (USW) union and company management have been blacking out details of the negotiations, with only a few sparse reports appearing in local news outlets.

Striking workers are members of Local 200 of USW District 9. They are opposing unsafe working conditions as well as proposed attacks on seniority rights and health care cuts. Paris-based Constellium acquired the Muscle Shoals plant from Wise Metals [Wise Alloys and Reynolds] in 2015 in a \$1.4 billion takeover. Workers at the plant produce sheet metal primarily used for beverage cans, and the plant manufactures under contracts for highly profitable companies, including Budweiser.

Both the union and the company are working together to keep the strike isolated. They are seeking to prevent the workers from linking up with the broader struggles of the working class erupting under the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in the US and internationally.

The USW knows that the strike has widespread support in the working class. While its official Local 200 Facebook page has posted no updates or statements of support for the strike, the few posts on the strike on the District 9 page have received hundreds of positive reactions and many supportive comments from local workers of many different backgrounds and industries.

What the USW and its counterparts in the pro-capitalist trade unions around the world fear is that workers will begin to see the connections between their different struggles and unite independently of the unions. This, especially under conditions where workers in every country are struggling against the consequences of the ruling class’s deadly “herd immunity” policy that has

allowed the COVID-19 pandemic to spread out of control across the globe.

To provide a cover for the betrayal of the strike by the USW, the French metalworkers union FTM-CGT and “global” union IndustriALL have issued toothless letters of protest against Constellium’s attacks on its US workforce, proclaiming their support for the striking workers and voicing empty promises to mobilize the international working class.

Workers have every reason to be skeptical of the motives behind these letters, which the USW announced in a press release on its international website after giving no updates on the Local 200 strike for more than a week.

The December 23 letter to USW International President Tom Conway, signed by Valter Sanches, General Secretary of IndustriAll, states: “It is unacceptable that Constellium’s management imposes their conditions on the workers, particularly misusing the current Covid-19 crisis. Nevertheless, USW and its members, through their legitimate strike, will never allow the company to do so... Therefore, IndustriALL Global Union calls on Constellium’s management in Muscle Shoals to come back to the negotiation table to bargain a fair, acceptable contract with USW. If the situation is not resolved soon, together with our affiliates having membership in the countries where Constellium has operations, we will mobilize our united forces with a worldwide campaign until justice is done in Muscle Shoals, Alabama.”

Sanches’ pledge of support is worthless. IndustriAll, a supposed “global union,” is made up of the labor bureaucracies in North America and Europe, which have begun to construct what it refers to as “free and independent trade unions” in Mexico. These organizations are based on the labor-management partnerships practiced by the unions in North America and Europe based on the

supposed identity of interests between labor and capital. They are thus based on an explicit rejection of genuine international working class solidarity and socialism.

Nowhere in the world where IndustriALL operates has it fought a principled battle to demand the closure of non-essential industries and fight for the rights of workers to full compensation until the COVID-19 pandemic is under control. While the “international” trade union conglomerate has voiced promises of international solidarity on workers’ rights to a safe workplace, it has never acted upon them.

In none of its statements of support for Constellium workers has IndustriAll proposed any concrete action—sympathy strikes, pickets, boycotts. As in countless other strikes such empty expressions of sympathy go hand in hand with preparations for betrayal.

One of the executive committee members of IndustriALL, long-standing leader of the Mexican miners union Los Mineros, Napoleon Gomez Urrutia, has been thoroughly exposed as a tool of corporate management. In 2006, he refused to address safety measures at Grupo Mexico’s Pasta de los Conchos mine in the Mexican state of Coahuila that led to an explosion, which killed 65 workers. Most recently, Urrutia acted behind-the-scenes in collaboration with the USW, Teamsters and other AFL-CIO unions to isolate the strike of 1,800 Asarco copper miners in Texas and Arizona from their brothers and sisters exploited by the same corporate oligarchs in Latin America.

The “support” from the FTM-CGT is just as hypocritical. The December 22 letter signed by Frédéric Sanchez, General Secretary of FTM-CGT and Philippe Tremouille of CGT Constellium promises, “You can count on the full support of the FTM-CGT and the CGT Constellium in your struggle. We will be your voice at the top management and we will defend your positions as firmly as ours... you can count on our solidarity and we will organize as soon as possible a meeting by videoconference between the unions of Constellium in France with the delegates of USW Local 200 in order to take stock of the situation.”

For decades, the CGT has served the French corporations by keeping the mass struggles of workers in France isolated and tied to the capitalist state, including during the French general strike of 1995 that posed a direct threat to the right-wing administration of Prime Minister Alain Juppé. Their role as a pro-capitalist, anti-worker organization was underscored by the 2014 verdict against the French energy utility Electricité et Gaz de

France for illegally funneling money to the CGT through its Social Action Fund, run by the CGT union. The CGT was found to have been using the money to fund its operations, including fictitious jobs and the financing of the Stalinist French Communist Party’s activities.

By stepping in to help the USW isolate the Constellium workers in Alabama, the FTM-CGT and IndustriALL are playing the same treacherous role as they play in Latin America, Canada and Europe. They seek to prevent a fight against the corporations for workers independent interests. Above all the USW opposes any effort to mobilize the working class across national boundaries in a unified fight against the capitalist system as a whole.

For this reason, it is imperative that workers learn 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, of, by and for the workers, are not aimed at pressuring the unions. The USW, FTM, and other unions have proven through betrayal after betrayal that they are not organizations that fight for the working class and cannot be reformed.

If the Constellium workers do not take their struggles into their own hands by building such independent organizations, the danger is that they will face the fate of the Asarco miners, who were starved and isolated by the USW for ten months until they accepted a concessions contract that cut wages, health care benefits, and left workers in the same dangerous conditions that they had fought against.

In the Asarco strike, it was only the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Committee of the Fourth International that put forward a viable political program for the workers to fight for their demands in opposition to the policies being imposed by the USW. The WSWS will support and assist in every way possible workers who want to build these committees and encourages metalworkers who want to learn more about rank-and-file committees to contact us today.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact