

United Steelworkers betrays Constellium strike in Alabama after weeks of isolating workers

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16 January 2021

Workers at Paris-based aluminum sheet manufacturer Constellium in Muscle Shoals, Alabama were sent back to work Tuesday after they approved a five-year contract brought back by the United Steelworkers (USW), ending a nearly month-long strike. More than 400 aluminum workers at the plant walked out December 15 after voting near-unanimously to strike against unfair labor practices, including unsafe working conditions, threats by the company to end seniority rights, and cuts to health care benefits.

Both the vote totals and substantive details of the contract have not been made public by the USW, in line with its policy of isolating the struggle of the Constellium workers.

The USW has said nothing about whether the contract addresses the critical issues of job security, health and safety measures, or workers' health care benefits and time off. The USW made no attempt to fight for greater COVID safety measures as the global pandemic rages, with new strains of the disease being found in the United Kingdom, Japan, and more immediately, in surrounding states such as Texas and Georgia.

The strike was called after negotiations between the USW and Constellium failed to produce an agreement prior to the November 1, 2020 expiration date despite dragging on for months. Throughout the strike, both the company and the union worked to systematically black out news of the struggle in an attempt to keep the striking workers isolated from the wider working class against the backdrop of an increasingly tense political situation in the United States and internationally.

In a further effort to prevent Constellium workers from linking up with wider sections of the working class, including educators in Alabama, the USW maintained virtual silence on the strike on its website and across most

of its social media accounts.

In the same manner that it betrayed steelworkers in the US in 2018, oil workers in 2019, and Asarco miners in 2020, the USW has refused to disclose details of the negotiations with Constellium.

The central fear of the USW all along was that the stand by Constellium workers might spark a broader movement among other sections of workers who face similar attacks on their safety and living standards, such as auto or meatpacking.

Seeking to cover its betrayal of the strike against the backdrop of the out-of-control COVID-19 pandemic, the USW employed the help of the so-called "global union" IndustriALL and the French metalworkers union FTM-CGT to isolate workers.

In late December, FTM-CGT and IndustriALL 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. It is now plainly obvious that these declamations of support were a sham, aimed at covering up of the betrayal by the USW.

The USW has not publicly released terms of the contact settlement, neither the "highlights" of the contract, much less the full agreement. The most detailed statement about the terms of the contract was given by USW International representative for USW Local 200, Kevin Key, in an interview with WAFF 48 News, who said, "the new agreement had some built-in protections, such as shift preferences based on seniority to help protect workers' seniority." This is not a guarantee of seniority rights, but a concession to Constellium.

According to WAFF 48, workers will also receive a 15 percent raise over the life of the contract, on average three percent per year. This barely allows workers to keep up

with the rising costs of health care, education, shelter, food, clothing, and fuel, expenses that for the most part have risen sharply over the course of the economic crisis of 2020 triggered by the pandemic. The union also claimed that it eliminated the wage tier with this contract, again without spelling out the details.

What union officials hailed as a victory is in fact a corporate-friendly agreement aimed at extracting the largest possible amount of profit off the backs of workers in the midst of a mounting financial crisis and devastating pandemic. An unnamed Constellium spokesperson presented the settlement in glowing terms to the local media. “Constellium Muscle Shoals LLC is pleased that employees represented by the United Steelworkers Union, Local 200, at our Muscle Shoals plant have voted in favor of our proposed collective bargaining agreement. We look forward to these employees returning to work beginning January 12, 2021, as we continue to serve our customers and the community.”

In Colbert County (population 55,241), where Muscle Shoals is located, there are 5,222 confirmed cases of the virus and 70 deaths. The state of Alabama currently has reported 414,583 cases of COVID-19 and 5,945 deaths since the beginning of the pandemic. Hospitals in the state are so overwhelmed that Dr. Don Williamson, president of the Alabama Hospital Association, told FOX10 News, “We are at the precipice, and over the precipice...We are holding on now by our fingertips.”

In spite of the known risks to workers in factories and schools, the unions refuse to insist on implementing necessary measures to save lives, that is: to shut down all non-essential production, and that the companies pay all employees a full income until the pandemic is under control and cover any and all health care costs.

The USW and other unions have long spewed nationalist rhetoric aimed against workers in other countries, primarily China, to blackmail workers into voting for sellout contracts in the name of keeping plants “competitive.” This divide-and-rule strategy of pitting US workers against their overseas brothers and sisters was reiterated by USW District 9 Director Daniel Flippo, who wrote on Facebook before the 2020 US elections, “The larger point is that the way we bring America back is by being cognizant of where things are produced and as much as possible, buying American made products, they are made by your neighbors... It is okay to support one party or the other, I certainly do most of time, but it is never okay to put that party above your faith in our country or its principles. I do not support what President

Trump has done relative to workers and Labor. But he is the President and I respect that.”

In opposition to this nationalist program, workers need an international strategy, uniting workers in a common struggle against the transnational steel companies. The *World Socialist Web Site* called for Constellium workers to form rank-and-file committees early on in the strike, with the aim of linking up with workers at Constellium’s plants in Europe and China, who face attacks similar to those levied against their brothers and sisters in North America.

With the rapid spread of a new, more infectious strain of COVID, international unity is even more critical. This is especially true for workers in the US, where democratic rights are threatened by the breakdown of democratic forms of rule.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on workers to form rank-and-file committees, following the examples of teachers and autoworkers, who are linking up independently of the trade unions and capitalist political parties to save jobs and lives. These committees must aim not to pressure the unions to fight, a hopeless task, but to advance an independent program of struggle for workers.

These committees need to be completely independent of the unions and big business political parties in order to build the framework through which workers can struggle for their demands. They must be democratic organizations, based on fighting for the needs of workers, not what the corporations say they can afford. They will give workers the potential to link metal and mining workers across the globe in a struggle to overthrow the capitalist system and 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 WWS and Socialist Equality Party will do everything we can to help workers build these committees and lead the way forward against the attacks on their rights. If you are a metalworker who is interested in building a rank-and-file committee at your workplace, we encourage you to contact us today.



To contact the WWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact