

Over 1,000 Allegheny Technologies steelworkers vote to authorize strike

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7 March 2021

Steelworkers at specialty steel manufacturer Allegheny Technologies (ATI) in Brackenridge, Pennsylvania, located about 20 miles outside of Pittsburgh, voted to authorize a possible strike by an overwhelming 95 percent majority on Friday night. The 1,300 workers who voted on the authorization are members of the United Steelworkers (USW) union.

The USW claims that ATI has proposed a four-year contract that will cut workers' wages, overtime pay and health insurance, make scheduling worse for workers, and expand the use of contract labor. Workers at the Brackenridge facility have not had their wages increased since 2014, over half a decade, according to the union, and workers are also threatened with layoffs. ATI plans to eliminate up to 200 jobs in the Alle-Kiski region by the summer of this year and close the melt shop at the Brackenridge facility.

The vote is a sign of the growing militancy among industrial workers in the US in the face of austerity and the herd immunity policy of the ruling class in the US and globally.

In spite of the overwhelming support of rank-and-file workers for strike action, the USW has made it clear that it does not intend to prepare for a walkout. A statement issued by union officials after the vote tally was announced states, "It is clearly in the best interest of everyone to resolve the outstanding issues through collective bargaining without a work stoppage, but ATI must change its approach before we can achieve a fair contract."

USW officials intend to use the strike authorization vote merely to pressure company officials to return to the bargaining table to work out a rotten concessions deal that union leaders can then attempt to sell to workers as a "victory," or otherwise browbeat workers into submission.

The history of repeated betrayals by the USW of the struggles of steel and mine workers contains vital lessons for the ATI workers as they approach this contract struggle. The strike vote takes place against the backdrop of the intense political and economic crisis of the capitalist ruling class,

whose interests the USW serves.

If workers at the Brackenridge mill strike, it will be the second time production has been halted at the company by a labor dispute since 1994. In the last round of negotiations, the USW pushed through a concessions contract, ending a six-month lockout of 2,200 workers at ATI's flat-rolled products division. Throughout the lockout, the USW worked to systematically isolate ATI workers throughout the Pittsburgh area from one another, from 31,000 steelworkers also under the USW at US Steel and ArcelorMittal throughout the US, from other critical sections of workers in the country, and from workers globally.

ATI workers have not had a wage increase since 2014. The USW has worked to isolate and demoralize workers in order to push concessions through in the name of maintaining the "competitiveness" of the corporation. During the lockout, the USW did not lift a finger to defend workers attacked by the company. Management's provocations included transporting scabs across the picket line in vans that struck and injured workers.

In 2018, the USW refused to call a strike by over 30,000 steelworkers at ArcelorMittal US (now Cleveland-Cliffs) and US Steel mills after workers at the two corporations voted unanimously to go on strike. Instead, the union isolated the workers, demoralized them by putting on a show of strike preparations without ever calling a strike, and forced through a concessions contract behind the workers' backs through a blackout of negotiations. Most workers still have not seen the full contract, only the highlights, which include paltry wage increases that amount to pay cuts, no protections against layoffs, no benefits for new hires, and no improvements to health and safety measures or reductions to the grueling working hours in the mills.

Along with the Teamsters and several other unions, the USW isolated and betrayed the struggle of Asarco workers in the states of Arizona and Texas in August 2020 after a courageous 10-month strike, sending 1,800 workers back to the mines on management's terms. Striking miners were allowed just \$225 in maximum strike payments per week,

while the USW strike fund contained well over \$150 million.

As it wrapped up the betrayal of the Asarco miners, the USW isolated a strike of 450 steelworkers at the Russian-based steel giant NLMK north of Pittsburgh.

In January of this year, the union betrayed the strike of over 400 aluminum workers at Constellium in Muscle Shoals, Alabama after collaborating with trade union officials in Europe to isolate them from their brothers and sisters in the industry internationally, who were facing the same attacks on their living standards while being forced to work in unsafe conditions as the pandemic surged.

Workers at ATI must not have any illusions that things will go differently this time if the struggle remains under the control of the USW. The bitter lessons of the past point to the need for ATI workers to break out of the grip of the union.

The strike vote takes place against the backdrop of a major escalation in the restructuring of the steel industry in the US and worldwide parallel to the shift to electrification of the auto industry, and the crisis of capitalism that accelerated in the wake of the global coronavirus pandemic.

In the past year, as lockdowns began to be lifted worldwide amid predictions of a growing demand for steel on the global market, iron ore pellet producer Cleveland-Cliffs announced the takeover of ArcelorMittal's US operations. This marked a significant step toward the further consolidation of the means of raw steel production into fewer hands. US Steel, the second-largest raw steel producer in the US, has also made advancements in the integration of electric steelmaking into its operations.

Both corporations have been racing to corner the global market and are preparing to carry out attacks on the living standards of workers to ensure the highest level of profitability possible amid a deepening economic crisis. Trade unions like the USW, rooted as they are in the defense of capitalism and the nation-state system, are playing a key role in the corporations' plans.

In 2016 the USW gave full support to Trump's reactionary "America First" agenda and tariffs on metals imports, which ultimately created a crisis in the American steel industry, the brunt of which was borne by workers in the shape of mill closures, layoffs, and wage and benefit cuts. It is now in full support of Democratic President Biden's right-wing "America is back" strategy, which is the nationalism of the Trump administration re-branded with an even harder line against China that threatens the escalation of military conflict between the two nuclear-armed powers. Their aim, which is the same as that of the corporations, is to suppress the struggle of workers against the attacks that are coming and to prevent strikes as the capitalist powers prepare for

war.

What is the way forward for workers who voted to strike? ATI workers know that they cannot trust the USW to carry out a struggle in their interests. They have powerful allies in the working class, to whom they must turn. While the capitalist class has been thrown into turmoil over the past year, workers in the metals industry in the US, Mexico and Germany, and autoworkers, teachers, health care, meatpacking workers and many others have shown their opposition through strikes, walkouts, and the forming of rank-and-file safety committees independent of the trade unions and the capitalist political parties.

ATI workers have a powerful example to follow in the Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee where educators formed an independent structure, outside the control of the unions and the Democratic Party, to democratically draft their own demands based on what the workers need and not what the corporations say is affordable.

The will of ATI workers to strike is part of a growing movement in the working class that ultimately leads in the direction of a political general strike against the capitalist system. The formation of these committees will give the organizational structure they need to organize a struggle in defense of their interests against the corporation. For this to succeed workers must be armed with a socialist program aimed at placing the steel industry under the control of the working class worldwide, not the profit interests of a wealthy few.

Workers at ATI who are reading this and want to take the steps to build their own committee should contact us today.



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