

Workers at Bradken steel mill in Atchison, Kansas enter second week of strike while USW imposes isolation

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Nearly 60 hourly steelworkers at the Bradken specialty steel casting mill in Atchison, Kansas, walked out on strike on Monday, March 22. There are 131 workers employed at the plant in total. The strike enters its second week today.

The striking workers are organized under United Steelworkers (USW) Local 6943. Workers voted overwhelmingly to strike at a March 12 vote, after unanimously voting down Bradken's "last, best and final offer." The USW waited to give the company the required 72-hour notice of intent to strike until March 19, a full week after the strike vote passed.

The local has not publicly detailed the demands of the company or its own in the press or on social media. According to local union officials, the strike is an unfair labor practice strike and not a strike that raises any economic demands.

The timing of the strike at Bradken is important. It started just over one week before over 1,000 USW workers at Allegheny Technologies Inc. (ATI) in Pennsylvania are set to go on strike this Tuesday after passing a 95 percent in-favor strike vote on March 5. Workers in Atchison must be wary of the USW making attempts to isolate steelworkers by ending the strike before ATI workers walk out.

Bradken is a leading global manufacturer and supplier of cast iron and steel products, according to its website, and is headquartered in Mayfield West, New South Wales, Australia. The corporation runs manufacturing and mining operations in the US, Australia, Canada, China, India, and Myanmar.

Workers produce locomotive rail and transit components and assemblies, mining, construction, industrial and military castings and general steel castings at the Atchison plant. The operation relies on electric-arc furnaces to produce an output of 36,500 tonnes per year.

Bradken became a subsidiary of Hitachi Construction Machinery Co., Ltd. in 2017, a subsidiary of Hitachi, Ltd. Hitachi Construction Machinery Co. recorded \$2.3 billion in gross profit in 2020, a drop from \$2.68 billion in 2019, but still well above its 2017 gross profit of \$1.57 billion. Bradken is incorporated in the state of Delaware, a notorious tax haven.

The USW has claimed that Bradken has refused to bargain

fairly with the union. Local 6943 President Gregg Welch told the *Atchison Globe* that "service bargaining and unfair labor practices are why we're doing this. It's not about protecting our seniority rights and keeping our senior people working."

Like every contract negotiated by the USW—and all other unions for that matter—the negotiations with Bradken are held between company executives and union officials on the bargaining committee behind closed doors. Workers are routinely kept in the dark about the terms that are being discussed, knowing nothing until a contract is about to be pushed through. Then, workers receive only the highlights of the contract signed off by union officials and company management before being rushed to vote. In recent years, workers have rarely been given the full contracts to read that have been negotiated by the USW before voting, in violation of their rights.

Workers have denounced a March 21 letter sent to them by Bradken Vice President of Operations Ken Bean, which stated that workers can cross the picket line to continue working if they decide by becoming either a "dues-paying only, non-member" or resign from the union. Kansas is a so-called "right-to-work" state, meaning that workers can work at a unionized workplace without being required to join the union or pay dues.

Bean also told the *Atchison Press* that the company was using scab labor to continue production during the strike, reporting that "the company was taking all steps possible to make sure production was not interrupted, utilizing all options at their disposal."

Workers at the Atchison mill and the community have professed their determination not to cross the picket lines at Bradken on the USW 6943 and 6943-1 Facebook page. As one worker wrote in response to a post announcing the "last, best and final" offer from Bradken: "98% of Transportation will NOT cross the line! My family will be there to support the strike, it is important to our family and our communities."

In order to intimidate and wear down the morale of the striking workers, Bradken has deployed local police to the picket lines and has issued a restraining order to prevent local supporters from walking outside the facility in the areas where

workers are picketing. The USW has effectively done nothing to protect workers from these intimidation tactics, leaving workers isolated on the picket lines from the working class in the area, including some 8,000 autoworkers at Ford's Kansas City Assembly Plant roughly 55 miles away in Claycomo, Missouri.

Against the backdrop of mass unemployment, the economic crisis facing workers worldwide, and the public health disaster as a result of the ruling class' decision to prioritize profits over public safety during the COVID-19 pandemic, the AFL-CIO and the USW are using another tactic. Unable to contain opposition through previous methods of strike suppression, they are seeking to use the strike to string workers out on starvation wages on the picket lines, isolate them from other sections of workers nationally and internationally, and force through a concessions contract that will allow Bradken to accumulate enough profit to remain competitive in the short term against its national and international rivals in the industry.

A growing wave of militancy is coursing through the working class internationally in response to the ruling class' criminal neglect of public safety during the pandemic and demands for austerity measures even as it forces workers back into unsafe workplaces to produce profit. The strike at Bradken in Atchison is an expression of this militancy, and the *World Socialist Web Site* is in full support of the workers' fight against the company. However, the WSWS also urges workers to take their struggle into their own hands and not allow it to be sabotaged by the USW, which is planning to give in to corporate demands behind the backs of workers.

Workers at Bradken in Kansas and ATI in Pennsylvania must draw conclusions from the valuable lessons of two recent strikes betrayed by the USW and the international trade unions. The USW isolated mineworkers at Asarco in Texas and Arizona last year for nine months in a bitter strike against the international mining conglomerate. Aluminum workers at Constellium in Muscle Shoals, Alabama, were sold out after nearly one month of struggle against the French-owned manufacturer. Each struggle ended in the USW giving the corporations what they demanded.

The USW is not only isolating workers at Bradken from their fellow workers at ATI, but from their brothers and sisters being exploited by the same corporation throughout the world, and from steelworkers and metalworkers globally who are facing attacks by the ruling class on their livelihoods. Workers at Liberty Steel in the UK stand to lose their jobs and have their communities decimated if the corporation and the Community union collaborate to shutter operations at its mills in Rotherham and Stocksbridge, according to the BBC.

The ruling elites use nationalism to whipsaw workers in one country against another, with the aim of preventing the working class from linking their struggles internationally to deal a collective blow to the capitalist system. The nationally based trade unions tie workers to the interests of their exploiters,

declaring that what is good for the national interest is good for the working class, and seek to channel class tensions into support for the war plans of the ruling class.

USW International President Tom Conway recently penned a piece for Independent Media Institute which calls for the US to manufacture more component parts within national borders in response to an international semiconductor shortage which has interrupted production in the auto industry. Rather than call out the nationalist and profit-driven policies of the ruling class for the job and wage cuts that have resulted from the shortage, Conway backs Biden's nationalist "America is Back" plan as he did Trump's "America First," both of which are ultimately aimed at deepening trade war measures against China.

Across the world, workers are rejecting the nationalist framework of the trade unions and are fighting to take their struggles against the capitalist system into their own hands by forming independent rank-and-file safety committees. Workers in these committees are drawing up their own demands, based on what they need and not what the unions and corporations say that the ruling class can "afford." Very importantly, these committees are providing the organizational framework for workers to link up their struggles across industries and international borders to fight to end the capitalist system of exploitation and replace it with socialism, the only economic system that can achieve the promise of social equality.

We urge workers on strike at Bradken and workers at ATI to form rank-and-file committees of their own so that their strikes can link up and fight against the isolation imposed by the USW. These committees must demand an end to dangerous working conditions, substantial increases to wages and benefits, full income and health benefits for all retirees and a reinstatement of the eight-hour day. Workers must also demand that all negotiations between the USW and the corporations be livestreamed and that the full contract be made available to members to study and discuss for two weeks before voting.

The Socialist Equality Party and the WSWS will do everything possible to support the organization of these committees. Contact us today if you are interested in forming a rank-and-file strike committee at your plant.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact