

1,300 steelworkers in five states strike at Allegheny Technologies

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1,300 steelworkers at 9 mills in five states went on strike Tuesday morning against Allegheny Technologies Inc. in what many workers see as a continuation of a years-long struggle against the company. In 2015-2016, management locked out 2,200 workers for seven months.

The strike is taking place at five Pennsylvania facilities — Brackenridge, Latrobe, Natrona Heights, Vandergrift and Washington — as well as Lockport, New York; Louisville, Ohio; New Bedford, Massachusetts; and Waterbury, Connecticut.

Company officials say that they will keep production going using management and hired replacements.

Workers at the facilities produce specialty grade steel, used primarily in appliances and the aerospace industry. They have been working under a one-year contract extension, which expired in February. They have not had a pay raise in over seven years. In press reports, the company is claiming to be offering a pay increase, while at the same time increasing the costs of health coverage.

“They are giving us with one hand while taking it away with another,” said one striker at the company’s flagship plant in Brackenridge.

The company has cut hundreds of jobs in the past five years, and is seeking more job cuts by contracting out entire departments and forcing workers to work 12-hour shifts.

“They’ve cut a lot of jobs,” said Mark Gibson, who has 29 years working for the company. “We have about 500 guys now [in Brackenridge]. That is way down from the 800-900 we had a few years ago. They want to keep cutting jobs.”

Health care is another major issue. “When I first started, we didn’t have to pay for health insurance,” Gibson continued. “Now they want to keep making us pay more and more. Health care is important to us. We work with a lot of chemicals, breathing in all kinds of things. It is a very dangerous job.”

“They want to just keep taking, taking and taking,” said Jerome Lyons, with 15 years. “There are people on the street [furloughed], but they want others to work 12-hour shifts on straight time rather than call those people back.”

The prospect of layoffs is on everyone’s mind. Since 2015, ATI has eliminated almost 900 jobs—including the closure of mills in Bagdad and Midland, Pennsylvania—and eliminating

entire lines within the other plants.

“They have gotten rid of the silicon line and want to stop making commodity grade steel,” said another striker with 15 years at the company. Silicon steel is used in transformers and motors, while commodity grade is a reference to stainless steel often in kitchen appliances and sinks.

“Those lines are in the green, but all they want to make is the high grade steel for the aerospace industry, which makes the most profits.

In addition, he pointed out that the company is demanding to contract out the maintenance work on the locomotives and trucks used throughout the mill.

“They don’t care about people, we are just a number to them. All they care about are profits. They already eliminated the pension for new hires, they just get a 401K plan. Now they don’t want to give them a choice for health care and force them into the salary health plan.”

Workers also pointed to the company’s response to the coronavirus. “We worked through the entire thing, we never shut down,” said one striker, who added that many workers got sick, but the company would not tell them if it was COVID-19 or something else. “People are always getting hurt or sick from the chemicals we are using, so you don’t know why someone is off.”

According to one worker, 30 workers at the Vandergrift mill had COVID-19 out of a total workforce of 130.

The strike at ATI is part of a growing wave of workers struggles both in the United States and internationally. Mass unemployment and the social crisis brought on by the sacrifice of workers’ lives to maintaining profits during the pandemic has prompted workers into struggle around the world.

In entering this struggle and for it to be successful, it is necessary for steelworkers to carefully review the lessons of previous struggles, in particular the treacherous role of the United Steelworkers union (USW). This includes the 2015-2016 lockout.

In 2015, steelworkers overwhelmingly rejected ATI’s “last, best and final” offer. Three days later, August 12, the company locked out its then 2,200 employees and began hiring replacement workers.

For 7 months, steelworkers at ATI stood on the picket line

while the USW worked to isolate their struggle. Around the country, contracts for tens of thousands of autoworkers and communication workers had expired during the lockout, creating powerful possibilities for a united struggle.

Steelworkers at US Steel and ArcelorMittal were forced to continue working without a contract, even while steelworkers at ATI were on the picket line. The USW reached settlements with ArcelorMittal in the fall 2015 and US Steel in February 2016, which included massive job cuts and concessions in wages and benefits.

In March of 2016, the USW accepted a contract that included most of the demands made by ATI including the elimination of hundreds of jobs, no wage increase for its existing workers and a two-tier system for new hires.

Workers who went back to work found that management and contractors continued doing many of the jobs that they took over during the strike. The grievance procedure was suspended for 60 days, giving management the right to do whatever they wanted.

When the current contract expired in February 2020, the USW agreed to extend the contract by a year—again with no pay raise for its members—with the hope that they could reach a concessions contract that they could sell to them.

The USW has classified the strike as an “unfair labor practice,” stating that the company is not bargaining in good faith. The union presents this to steelworkers as a clever tactic that will allow workers to receive unemployment benefits and that the company would be barred from labeling scabs it hires as permanent replacements.

In reality, this has become another method by the union of isolating the struggle of workers. Rather than appeal to the tens of thousands of other steelworkers to join this fight, let alone unite with the struggles of teachers, autoworkers or Amazon workers, the USW’s labeling of the strike as an “unfair labor practice,” allows it to remain isolated and gives them the option to call off the strike at any time, under the nebulous pretext that management is now bargaining in “good faith.”

The USW is working around the clock with management to shut down the strike as soon as possible. “We are willing to meet with management all day, every day,” said David McCall, USW International vice president in charge of negotiations, in a prepared statement. “But ATI needs to engage with us to resolve the outstanding issues. We will continue to bargain in good faith, and we strongly urge ATI to start doing the same.”

This pattern has been done before. Last year, the USW completed an unconditional surrender in the 10-month-long strike of 1,800 copper miners against Mexican-owned mining firm Asarco. Like with the ATI strikers, the USW claimed that the copper miners were engaged in an “unfair labor practice” strike.

In August, after the district NLRB office rejected the union’s claim and issued a complaint against the miners, the USW ordered its members to return to work and closed down the

picket lines.

Asarco refused to fire the scabs they had hired and rehire all the miners. Miners who were offered to return to work were forced to work at lower-paying jobs and worse shifts. The USW warned workers who refused to go back that they would be considered as resigned, lose their unemployment benefits and recall rights.

Likewise, the USW strike of 450 workers against NLMK in Farrell, PA was called under the banner of “unfair labor practice” and the workers were left isolated and forced back to work. Currently the USW is isolating a strike by 60 workers against Bradken in Atchison, Kansas by using the same method.

The USW has a long history of using nationalism and chauvinism to divide American workers from their class brothers and sisters in other countries. The USW was a strong backer of the Trump administration’s steel tariffs against China, Europe, Brazil and elsewhere. It only criticized Trump for not going far enough—the union would like to see automobiles and auto parts added to the list of items with tariffs.

The USW supported the election of Joe Biden, who supports in all essentials the same trade war measures of the Trump administration. Biden has continued and promoted the hostilities towards China, and his “America is Back” plan is in part an attempt to further ally with the trade unions and to use them to whip up chauvinism among workers.

The way forward for ATI workers is to form rank-and-file committees of their own to 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.



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