USW moves to shut down Bradken strike, attempting to isolate striking ATI workers

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The United Steelworkers union (USW) has quietly announced a tentative agreement with Atchison, Kansas, specialty steelmaker Bradken in a bid to end an ongoing strike of nearly 60 steelworkers, which is set to enter its second week. Following the standard USW playbook, workers will be forced to vote on the agreement on Monday, likely without even receiving the full text of the contract they are voting on.

In shutting down the Bradken strike, the USW is attempting to further isolate over 1,000 workers at steelmaker Allegheny Technologies Inc. (ATI), who struck last week in response to company demands for givebacks and job cuts.

The only information available about the tentative agreement with Bradken comes from a post by union local president Gregg Welch Saturday on a USW Local 6943 Facebook group, which states, “We just signed a deal! gonna vote at 2:00pm Monday April 5th at the Atchison Center.” The USW has reported no other information about the agreement. A site-specific search of the USW’s website, usw.org, for the term “Bradken” yields no results later than 2013.

The only reason the USW would be trying to rush through a vote so quickly is in order to stampede workers into accepting a sellout agreement before they have time to sufficiently study its contents. Workers should reject such an attempt and demand a full two weeks to be able to study the complete language of the contract before voting on it.

At both Bradken and ATI, the USW has been using the tactic of a so-called “unfair labor practices” (ULP) strike, based not on demands for protecting the jobs and living standards of steelworkers, but on the argument that management is not negotiating “in good faith.” The same tactic is also being used by the United Mine Workers of America union (UMWA) in a strike of 1,100 coal miners at Warrior Met Coal in Alabama which began last week.

In a ULP strike, workers are prohibited from raising demands related to compensation, jobs, or working conditions, and they can face sanction by the National Labor Relations Board if they do so. The tactic allows the union to call the strike off at any time under the pretext that management has begun negotiating in “good faith.” As a result of the ULP approach taken by the USW, neither the union nor the company has publicly stated demands or even explained what proposals have been made.

Despite the USW’s efforts to isolate the strikes from each other, a worker at the ATI Vandergrift plant near Pittsburgh, who we do not name to avoid retaliation, said that they were in solidarity with the Bradken workers, adding, “They have my full support.”

The worker explained what is at stake in the contract struggle at ATI, nothing that the company “is getting out of stainless strip [commodity steel]. We’re going to lose about 400 jobs with this contract. Number 3 department in Brackenridge is shutting down. They are shutting down Waterbury [in Connecticut] and Louisville [in Ohio]. All these guys are losing their jobs without anywhere for them to go.”

The worker reported that ATI is preparing to bring in scab labor. In the 2015–2016 lockout, ATI used Strom Engineering for this purpose. At the conclusion of the lockout, ATI workers found their workplaces vandalized by Strom Engineering scabs, with their lockers broken into and their contents stolen, many machines broken either through incompetence or sabotage, and even human feces on the floor of the locomotive shop at one facility. ATI is reportedly working with a different scab contractor due to ongoing litigation with Strom Engineering from the lockout.

ATI has continued operations throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. “We never stopped one time during this whole pandemic,” the worker continued, “Not even once.

“In this plant, we’ve had probably 30 cases though the whole duration. There are about 170 of us.” There have been 20,525 reported cases in Westmoreland County (population 345,779), meaning that the documented infection rate in the Vandergrift plant is roughly three times the county average.

“We had our protocols and we did what we were supposed to do. If people got sick, they got quarantined. If their family

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members got sick, they got quarantined. I think it shows a lot of diligence among the workforce here. We were always trying to keep our distance, do what we should. We went for the longest time and there was not one case. Then it started trickling in, one or two every week or two."

The initial absence of cases and the subsequent increase is yet another illustration of the importance of suppressing community transmission to protect essential workers. While virtually every manufacturing enterprise has sought an "essential" designation in order to continue profit-making operations, at workplaces that are genuinely essential, comprehensive protections against transmission—including fully stocked and high-quality PPE, regular testing, contact tracing, and fully paid leave for workers who have been exposed to the virus—must be made available in order to protect the lives of workers and their families.

The worker expressed dissatisfaction with the USW's silence on the state of negotiations, "We haven't heard any updates from the international since the strike began. Crickets."

"I don't think the USW has evolved like you need to be nowadays in this time. The Executive Board from the International are a bunch of old-school, buddy-buddy guys who want to act like it's 1986.

"The USW is all business and money-driven. It's not about the workers anymore. It's all about compromising and trying to stay profitable. If someone has to go, that's how it is. For the rank-and-file, it feels like shut up and take it."

In 2015-2016, the USW left ATI workers isolated on lockout for over six months, starving workers with minimal strike pay and with health benefits cut off by the company. At the conclusion of the lockout, the USW was able to push through a contract that was essentially identical to the initial company proposal that the workers had decisively rejected to begin with, imposing significant cuts to healthcare, pensions, and the further introduction of casualized labor.

Workers cannot fight for their interests in the straitjacket of the USW. Over the past several decades, this organization has been transformed into an arm of management, a labor contractor aiming to ensure the profitability of US companies. In today's globalized economy, that means cutting workers' wages, benefits, and jobs to ensure "competitiveness" and fighting for trade war measures such as tariffs that lay the foundation for war, particularly against China, the world's leading producer of steel and the main geopolitical target of the Trump and Biden administrations.

In addition, the USW has ordered steelworkers to remain on the job throughout the COVID-19 pandemic with inadequate protections, resulting in outbreaks such as that at the Vandergrift plant.

The WSWS calls on workers at Bradken, ATI, and elsewhere to take the struggle into their own hands and form rank-and-file strike committees, democratically controlled by rank-and-file workers, independent of and in opposition to the USW, the Democrats, and the Republicans.

These committees must draw up their own demands, based on what workers need, not on what companies say they can afford. The list of demands should include 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. In contrast to the USW, which is isolating steelworkers from each other, rank-and-file committees must establish the broadest possible contact with other steelworkers and striking miners in Alabama, as well as with workers in the auto industry, logistics, education, health care, and other areas of manufacturing.

In this fight, steelworkers can follow the example of educators in New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, San Diego, Texas, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Tennessee and Alabama, as well as United Kingdom, Australia, Germany, and Sri Lanka, who have formed such committees and are fighting for safe working conditions, proper staffing levels, and good compensation.

We urge workers at Bradken and ATI who agree with this perspective to contact the Socialist Equality Party today to begin building a rank-and-file committee at your workplace.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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