

Steelworkers nearing end of second week of strike at ATI

Samuel Davidson
8 April 2021

The strike by 1,300 steelworkers against Allegheny Technologies Inc. (ATI) in five states in the American Northeast and Midwest is nearing the end of its second week.

The specialty steelmaker is seeking to close two mills, one in Louisville, Ohio and the other in Waterbury, Connecticut and cut hundreds of jobs. In addition, the company wants to force workers to pay more for their health care and expand on their already two-tier system by further cutting pensions and benefits for new hires. Workers have already not had a pay raise in seven years.

The strike is taking place at nine mills in five states. In addition to the Louisville, Ohio and Waterbury, Connecticut plants, workers are also on strike at mills in Lockport, New York; New Bedford, Massachusetts and five Pennsylvania facilities—Brackenridge, Latrobe, Natrona Heights, Vandergrift and Washington.

“We might as well not have a contract,” said one striker at the Brackenridge, Pennsylvania mill. “It doesn’t matter what the contract says, the company just does what it wants and tells us to take them to court.”

The company has been cutting jobs over the past decade. Since 2015, the number of workers has gone down from 2,200 to about 1,300 today. At the company’s largest mill in Brackenridge, the company has cut the number of workers from over 800 in 2015, to around 500 today.

“There are 100 people laid off, and they want to eliminate another 100 to 120 jobs,” said Micah Wood, who has worked in the Brackenridge mill for 16 years.

“They want to cut the millwrights and reduce crews in the melt shop. While they are cutting jobs, they want to bring in outside contractors to do the job. They want to break the union.

“We are also striking to protect the retirees. In the previous contract they cut the funding for the pension funds. We took a \$.50 an hour cut to help fund that, and

now the company doesn’t want to add anything to it.

“I don’t think it is right to tell people that this is what you are going to get when you retire. They work all these years, and then the company takes it away. You shouldn’t be able to do that.

“We are also striking for the new guys. They want to have a second and third tier. They will have to pay more for insurance and won’t have a pension, just a 401K.

“They want to divide us. This has been going on for a long time, not just here but all over. When the government broke the PATCO strikers (air traffic controllers in 1981), that set the signal for companies to just go after the workers.”

In 2015, the company locked the workers out for seven months while it attempted to restore production using management and scabs brought in through a staffing firm, Strom Engineering. This time the company has stated that it will also continue production using management and scabs with a different staffing firm.

Seth Walker, who works in the mill shop and has been with ATI for 11 years, said, “They are sending out a lot of propaganda to make us look bad in the community. They are coming after our health care. They are cutting jobs. They want to take out the contracting-out language.

“In the mill shop they want us to take 12-hour shifts at straight time. We work 12-hour days, three days one week and four the next. But they want us to do this on straight time.

“There are so many people on the street. If we worked eight-hour shifts, they could bring a whole crew back.

“What we want is to keep good paying jobs in the community. This is a dangerous, dirty and hot environment. We should get fair compensation for it.”

The strike against ATI is part of a growing national and international movement of the working class, who have been devastated by mass unemployment and deaths during a pandemic, while the Wall Street billionaires’

wealth has skyrocketed. Graduate students are on strike at Columbia University in New York, as well as nurses in Worcester, Massachusetts and coal miners in northern Alabama.

Throughout the world, in Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America, there are also a growing number of strikes by workers in basic industries, such as steel, auto, mining as well as among health care, education and transportation workers.

In each of these struggles, workers face not only the efforts of the corporations but the betrayal of the unions, which have long been integrated into the structures of management, with union officials earning the same as mid-level executives. Their role has become the supervisors and policemen of the workforce, while they collect union dues and often control health and pension funds which increase in value as benefits are cut.

In Alabama, 1,100 striking coal miners are rebelling against the United Mine Workers of America and organizing to vote down the contract which the union is seeking to force the miners to accept. Five years ago, the miners were forced to take a \$6.00 an hour pay cut when the company went bankrupt, yet the current contract only restores \$1.50 in wage increases.

Steelworkers are facing the same betrayal by the United Steelworkers (USW), which is working to isolate the strike. While workers want to see the protection of jobs, a substantial pay raise, benefits for retirees and new hires, the USW refuses to put forward any specific demands, instead hiding behind the classification of the strike as a so-called “unfair labor practices” (ULP) strike on the basis that management is not negotiating “in good faith.”

In a ULP strike, workers are prohibited from raising demands related to compensation, jobs or working conditions, and they can face sanctions by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) 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.”

For the USW and the unions, bargaining in “good faith” means working with the union bureaucracy to jointly enforce concessions. This was the case, for example, in the national oil refinery strike in 2015, which was also classified as a ULP strike, where the USW agreed to a deal which resolved none of the basic safety questions but created new joint labor-management “safety” committees. The USW even left refinery workers on the picket line by themselves at Marathon’s Galveston, Texas plant when management there refused to abide by the terms of the

national agreement.

Last year, the USW also completed an unconditional surrender in the 10-month-long ULP strike of 1,800 copper miners against Mexican-owned mining firm Asarco. The company 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 consider them to have resigned, lose their unemployment benefits and recall rights.

For years now, the USW has separated the workers at ATI from the steelworkers at US Steel, ArcelorMittal, now Cleveland Cliffs, as well as the tens of thousands of other workers throughout the region. Last week, the union called off the strike by steelworkers in Kansas and are seeking for force through another rotten contract.

The *World Socialist Web Site* urges steelworkers to form independent rank-and-file strike committees to fight against the isolation imposed by the union. These committees, democratically controlled by the workers, will advance among other demands: stop the layoffs, rehire all laid-off workers, end dangerous working conditions, increase wages and benefits substantially, provide full income and health benefits for all retirees and reinstate the eight-hour day.

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