

United Steelworkers union continues to isolate, muzzle ATI strikers as health care cutoff looms

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As the strike of roughly 1,300 steelworkers at Allegheny Technologies Inc. (ATI) facilities in five states enters its second week, the United Steelworkers union (USW) continues to keep workers entirely in the dark about ongoing negotiations. The USW is presenting its use of the unfair labor practices (ULP) strike as a clever tactic, to enable workers to collect unemployment benefits as long as they do not raise wage or benefit demands and simply call on management to “bargain in good faith.” This is the latest in a long line of ULP strikes and lockouts used by the USW and other unions to muzzle workers while slowly starving them into submission, ultimately pushing through the company’s demands.

In a meeting with ATI strikers last week, the USW began to backpedal on earlier claims that strikers in Pennsylvania and Ohio would be able to collect unemployment during the strike, according to a worker at ATI’s Vandergrift facility, 30 miles northeast of Pittsburgh. Before the strike “we were led to believe it was going to be a slam dunk because it was an unfair labor practice instead of an economic strike,” the worker told the WSW. “They brought a lawyer” during last week’s meeting, he reported. “They said it’s going to be a hard case unless we’re doing all the right things. I didn’t feel as secure about it as I was before.”

This is a not-so-veiled threat from the USW that unless workers remain entirely within the union straitjacket and refrain from making any demands related to wages, benefits, jobs, or working conditions, they will not receive the unemployment benefits the USW promised. The USW will also not allow workers to engage in active picketing to prevent the scabs ATI has hired from entering the mills. In Pennsylvania, the USW claims that unemployment benefits for ATI steelworkers would be \$590 per week plus \$300 per week due to COVID-19, or a total of \$890 per week, about half the weekly wage of many ATI workers.

USW strike pay does not start until four weeks into the strike, at the end of April, so ATI workers must wait an

additional two weeks before seeing a dime from the USW’s Strike and Defense Fund of hundreds of millions of dollars. The USW, which had assets of \$1.3 billion in 2020 and paid out \$506 million for the bloated salaries of top executives and staff, along with other expenses, will only pay ATI workers \$260 a week in strike benefits.

At the end of April, almost exactly when strike pay should kick in, ATI plans to terminate health care for striking workers, leaving them to pay for COBRA insurance. COBRA can cost well over \$1,000 dollars per month for a family of three, which would mean that the entire strike payment would be eaten up to keep a worker’s family insured.

All of this should be familiar to ATI workers. During the 2015–2016 lockout, which lasted seven months, the USW and the company employed essentially the same approach. After workers refused to accept the company’s demands for steep concessions on raises, health care, pensions, and contracting, ATI locked workers out. The USW employed the same ULP tactic, ordering workers to remain quiet and orderly as ATI trucked in scabs from Strom Engineering.

In that case, many workers were able to receive unemployment, but after ATI cut off health care benefits three and a half months into the strike, COBRA costs equaled the entire monthly benefit for most workers with families.

In 2015, the USW allocated only \$225 per week per worker to the affected union locals, which then distributed the funds in the form of \$100 grocery cards, supposedly providing the rest to workers on an as-needed basis. The USW has not released details of how it will disburse the \$260 per week per worker in strike funds.

While ATI workers languished on the picket lines, the 2015–2016 lockout overlapped with contract battles for hundreds of thousands of steel, auto, telecommunications, and municipal workers. One month into the lockout, in September 2015, contracts expired for 140,000

Fiat–Chrysler, General Motors, and Ford autoworkers. The United Auto Workers (UAW) resorted to threats, intimidation, and ballot fraud to push through company demands. In the same month, the USW forced 30,000 steelworkers at US Steel and ArcelorMittal to remain on the job without a contract, further isolating the ATI workers. The USW ultimately pushed through a contract at US Steel in February 2016 and waited until the ATI lockout had been betrayed to do the same at ArcelorMittal.

This mighty force of workers could have struck as one with the ATI workers to collectively win major concessions from the companies, and indeed, the *World Socialist Web Site* called in each case for a united struggle. Instead, the pro-corporate unions systematically kept these workers isolated from each other, forcing them to accept company demands.

After more than half a year on lockout, with unemployment benefits set to run out, the USW did the same to the ATI workers. With workers facing destitution and isolation imposed by the unions, the USW forced through a contract that was essentially the same as ATI's original offer, which workers had resoundingly voted down before the lockout.

The USW is following the same playbook this time, but history does not have to repeat itself. As was the case in 2015–2016, workers across the country are demonstrating their willingness to fight. In Alabama, 1,100 miners at Warrior Met Coal have been striking since April 1 and overwhelmingly voted down a pro-company contract pushed by the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA). Columbia University graduate student workers struck for three weeks beginning in May, and the workers remain without a contract after they were forced to do so by the UAW bargaining committee. More than 700 nurses in Worcester, Massachusetts, have remained on strike for over a month demanding safe staffing ratios as the health care system buckles under the weight of the disastrously managed COVID-19 pandemic.

In Ontario, Canada, 60 Fenner Dunlop mining supply workers, members of the USW, were locked out on February 15 after workers rejected a contract by 79 percent. Educators across the United States are fighting back against the criminal policy of reopening schools for in-person education during a pandemic. Millions of workers are reeling from the economic effects of the US government's decision to respond to the pandemic by funneling trillions to the wealthy while providing only minimal assistance to the working class.

We call on ATI workers to follow the example of autoworkers, educators and Amazon workers across the country and form democratically controlled rank-and-file committees, completely independent of and in opposition to

the pro-corporate unions. It was the direct initiative of rank-and-file autoworkers and educators, in opposition to the unions, that resulted in the closure of manufacturing and schools at the beginning of the pandemic. That is just a taste of the power of the working class fighting outside the union straitjacket. Rank-and-file strike committees formed by ATI workers would fight to break the isolation of the strike and link their struggles as broadly as possible with other sections of the working class.

In contrast to the USW, which has not stated concrete demands publicly or even privately to ATI workers, these rank-and-file committees must fight for what workers need, not what the company says it can afford. These demands must include a substantial wage increase, no cuts to health care, full pensions for new hires, job security (including for the hundreds of workers slated to lose their jobs this contract), an end to wage and benefit tiers and a return to the eight-hour day. At the same time, workers must demand \$900 a week in pay from the strike fund that belongs to rank-and-file workers, not Tom Conway and the rest of the USW functionaries.

Most importantly, ATI workers must recognize that they are not simply fighting against a company and a single pro-company union. They are fighting against the entire capitalist system and the Democratic and Republican parties and the trade unions that defend it. Relying on these forces, American capitalism is seeking to offset its economic decline by systematically destroying the jobs and living standards of workers, a process with which steelworkers are very familiar. They are also attempting to use the US's significant military power to subjugate its international rivals, particularly China and Russia, which can only result in catastrophe. Workers must respond to this war on the working class and preparations for a new world war by uniting US workers with our class brothers and sisters internationally against the capitalist system. We urge workers who agree with this perspective to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* today.



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