

Talks break off in strike by 1,300 steelworkers against Allegheny Technologies

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After two days of meetings, talks between the United Steelworkers and Allegheny Technologies, where 1,300 workers in five states have been on strike since March 30, broke off Tuesday afternoon after the company left, saying that the sides were too far apart.

According to a statement issued by the union Tuesday evening, Allegheny Technologies has continued to demand cuts to health care, pensions and jobs.

The breakoff of talks happened only one day after a return to the bargaining table by the USW. An ATI spokeswoman Natalie Gillespie said in a Monday morning statement that “the company has committed to remaining at the table for so long as the discussions remain productive and are moving the parties closer to an agreement.” According to the union statement, the USW’s bargaining committee will now meet on Thursday to review the company’s position and decide its next steps.

ATI workers have not had a pay raise in seven years. The last contract expired in February 2020 and was extended for one year. Hoping to avoid a strike, the union kept workers on the job for another month without a contract.

In calling the strike, the USW did not issue any basic demands for its members, but rather limited itself to the claim that ATI refused to bargain in “good faith.” The classification of the strike as an Unfair Labor Practice (ULP) strike allows the union to call it off any time claiming that the company is now negotiating in “good faith.”

While Monday’s talks broke off, the union has again reiterated its position that it is willing to talk with the company any time. The USW is hoping that it can use the existing talks to call off the strike.

Next week the company plans to cut the strikers’ health care benefits. Workers will be able to receive insurance under COBRA, but the costs can run over \$1,100 a month.

Striking workers are yet to receive any payment from the USW strike fund, which currently stands above \$150 million. USW officials say that workers will not receive payments until after they have been on strike for over four weeks. Then it will be a mere \$260 a week.

The strike by the 1,300 steelworkers is taking place at five Pennsylvania facilities—Brackenridge, Latrobe, Natrona Heights, Vandergrift and Washington—and at Lockport, New

York; Louisville, Ohio; New Bedford, Massachusetts; and Waterbury, Connecticut.

“The problem around here is that the company only cares about profits,” said Michelle Jageman, who has been working for ATI for 28 years at its flagship mill in Brackenridge, Pennsylvania. “This company always forgets what you have done. Working overtime, being away from your family.

“You can keep your \$3,000 [signing bonus], give us a raise. You will spend your bonus, but a raise lasts forever. We have been rolling over too long. There comes a time when you have to take a stand.”

Layoffs and seniority are two major concerns for the workers, as the company has been steadily cutting jobs. The Brackenridge plant had over 2,000 workers when Jageman started working for the company in the early 1990s. By 2015, the plant was running with 900 workers. Before the start of the strike, there were about 500 people working in the plant.

In June, ATI announced job cuts to both union and nonunion positions, including an early retirement offer, due to a drop in demand from the coronavirus pandemic.

In December, the company announced a major restructuring, which resulted in the loss of another 400 jobs. It is eliminating its line steel products used for appliances and cars, which the company says only makes a 1 percent profit, while concentrating on the more profitable specialty steels used for airplanes, electronics and the military.

The restructuring will cost another 200 jobs at the company’s Pittsburgh area mills, including about 120 jobs at its Brackenridge mill. The plans call for ceasing production at four other facilities in Waterbury, Connecticut; Louisville, Ohio; Bridgeview, Illinois and Pico Rivera, California.

The company has laid off the last 60 workers at its Albany, Oregon facility, which has been “ramped down,” using the company’s terminology. As recently as 2019, the company employed over 900 workers at three facilities in the Albany area.

As part of an effort to help ATI boost profits, last year the USW agreed to shift changes that allowed the company to run 12-hour shifts at straight time, a move which allowed the company to lay off workers.

The company is demanding concessions and layoffs because

of \$1.6 billion in losses reported from last year. While much of this was due to falling demand because of the COVID-19 pandemic, most were costs associated with the restructuring.

Company CEO Bob Wetherbee said that the job cuts and elimination of the standard steel sheet product lines will make the company a “leaner, more competitive aerospace and defense-focused powerhouse.”

“I’ve been laid off since September,” continued Michelle. “That is another thing that should be talked about. It is wrong to lay off people with 25-28 years’ service, while people who have just started are still working. Seniority should mean something.

“To this company there are no rules, they break the rules whenever they want. They are very good at lies,” continued Michelle. “They will say they are giving us a raise but then want to take it away on health care. No raise in seven years. We don’t get sick days, no personal days. We could settle if they gave us a raise. Don’t touch our health care, and don’t cut the pensions.”

John Rua has been a bricklayer for 29 years. “I’ve been working 12-hour shifts for the past six months. I don’t want to do that anymore.

“I want to spend time with my family. By the time you get home, you can’t go out to dinner with your wife. It is too late, and you are just too tired.

“We work three 12s [12-hour shifts] and two 8s [8-hour shifts]. The company figures that it is cheaper to work us than to bring the laid off people back on and have to pay them health care. Think of that. Who else would work seven years without a raise?”

The strike at ATI is part of a growing movement of coal miners, autoworkers, health care workers and educators across the country who are taking a stand against the massive layoffs and attacks on their living standards. It is becoming clearer to workers that the government and companies literally put profits ahead of the very lives of people.

In addition, powerful struggles of workers are emerging throughout the world, in Europe, Asia, Latin America and Africa.

Far from seeking to unify these struggles in a common struggle by the working class, the United Steelworkers is seeking to isolate and force the ATI workers back to work without a contract.

The union is especially eager to end the strike before it develops into a confrontation with the Biden administration, which the union supports. While the United Steelworkers is telling its members that the strike is an “Unfair Labor Practice” strike, such a determination has to be made by the Biden’s administration’s National Labor Relations Board, which is likely to rule against the workers.

The USW has a long history of using nationalism and chauvinism to divide American workers from their class brothers and sisters in other countries. Throughout the 1980s

and 1990s, this tactic was used to prevent a struggle against the closure and reorganization of the steel industry, which left over 100,000 workers without jobs.

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 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 USW does not want a confrontation with Biden. It is hoping that the administration’s infrastructure plan will provide a windfall to the union. The union is seeking to make deals to provide low cost Tier-2 labor for government projects while receiving increased dues payments.

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.

In contrast to the USW, 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 that all negotiations are open and live streamed so workers can see the deals being made. In addition, workers must demand \$900 a week from the strike fund, paid for out of the dues from rank-and-file workers, not Tom Conway and the rest of the USW functionaries.

We urge workers who agree with this perspective to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* today.



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