

ATI issues contract ultimatum to strikers as USW isolates workers

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Allegheny Technologies Inc. (ATI) has issued an ultimatum to 1,300 striking workers in five states: Accept the concessions contract on offer by Monday, or face the consequences. In response, the United Steelworkers union (USW) has issued a groveling statement, detailing the deep concessions it has already agreed to.

Meanwhile, the USW continues its policy of seeking to isolate the strike, attempting to wall off the struggle by ATI workers from other sections of workers, including Warrior Met coal miners in Alabama and Worcester, Massachusetts nurses who are battling to win back lost concessions.

After breaking off negotiations with the USW earlier in the week, ATI announced that unless workers approve its latest contract offer by 5 p.m. Monday, “It will be replaced by an offer that begins to reflect the costs incurred by ATI as a result of the strike.”

According to the most recent USW bargaining update, ATI is proposing significant concessions on health care and completely inadequate raises. Although workers have not had a raise since 2014, the USW has agreed to a \$4,000 lump sum bribe in lieu of a raise this year, followed by 3 percent raises in the next three years of the contract, barely keeping pace with inflation. ATI is insisting that these wage increases be tied to ending profit sharing and the introduction of health care premiums. ATI has also demanded the right to impose 12-hour shifts without payment of overtime after eight hours and the ability to contract work, but may have backpedaled on these points.

Based on ATI statements to the *Valley News Dispatch* earlier this week, proposed monthly premiums for a worker hired on or after January 1, 2024 would be \$250 for a family, more than 4 percent of monthly wages for a worker making \$70,000 a year, more than erasing that

year’s 3 percent pay raise. The health care proposal would also expand the use of pay and benefit tiers at ATI, with inferior health plans for new hires, further incentivizing the replacement of current workers. According to the USW bargaining update, ATI’s latest proposal would replace premiums with fixed percentage cost sharing, placing an additional cost burden on workers.

The USW statement also asserts that ATI is threatening that unless workers ratify the proposed contract, the company may withhold pensions from the roughly 400 workers it is preparing to lay off after proposed shutdowns of the Waterbury, Connecticut and Louisville, Ohio mills and the #3 finishing department of the Brackenridge mill in Pennsylvania.

The USW’s latest statement makes clear that the union recognizes that the membership would soundly reject this contract and bringing it up for a vote would damage the union’s credibility.

That said, the USW has no intention of leading workers in a fight for a better contract. Instead, the union will continue its time-tested strategy of slowly starving workers on the picket line while using on the unfair labor practices (ULP) strike tactic to prevent workers from raising any concrete demands or engaging in effective strike action.

The strike is now in its third week, and workers have yet to see a dime of strike pay. At the beginning of the strike, the USW claimed that winning the ULP case was all but a sure thing, entitling workers to collect \$890 per week in state unemployment benefits and forcing the company to pay for COBRA health care once ATI cuts off health insurance at the end of April.

However, now the USW is acknowledging that the ULP case is highly uncertain. However, the USW is still using the legal diversion of the ULP case to muzzle

strikers to prevent them from voicing concrete demands or in any way breaking out of the union's ineffectual, ritualized "picketing" protocol, allowing scabs into the mills unhindered.

Yesterday's USW strike update lays out for the first time key details of their ULP case against ATI. The contract officially expired in January 2020, the USW and ATI were supposedly close to an agreement, but agreed to a one-year contract extension once the pandemic reached the United States. In the interim, the USW alleges that ATI refused to send information related to profit sharing. The crux of the USW's argument that ATI is negotiating "in bad faith" is based on a disagreement with ATI over whether the company is expected to be profitable over the next few years.

The USW fully accepts ATI's "right" to make a profit under capitalism, even if that means axing jobs and slashing pay and benefits. All ATI needs to do is make a convincing case to the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) that their demands would enable them to more effectively compete with their rivals and remain in business. ATI will surely argue for the necessity of these cuts by pointing to an uncertain business outlook and to the inferior wages and benefits offered by its competitors, whose workers have seen their compensation decimated by decades of austerity, cuts the USW itself helped implement. If ATI makes such arguments, the NLRB will presumably rule that ATI's offer was made in good faith and that the USW's demands (and thus the strike) are economic in character, rather than a response to unfair labor practices.

The claims that ATI has refused to meet for negotiations are also tenuous at best. In a statement on Tuesday, the USW laid out its case that they were available any time for in-person bargaining and that "ATI representatives were only willing to meet virtually until March 26, 2021, when management finally agreed to meet with the local union presidents. The company's efforts that day fell short in trying to convince our leaders to accept the company's unfair and unnecessary contract demands."

ATI workers faced the same basic company-USW charade during their 2015-2016 lockout, which was also billed as an unfair labor practices action. After seven months on the picket line, facing major financial hardship due to the expiration of unemployment and

health benefits and with strike pay of only \$100 per week in grocery cards, the USW was able to browbeat workers into accepting essentially the same contract that ATI had proposed in the first place.

When the lockout began, there were 2,200 unionized ATI workers. Now there are 1,300. If workers go along with the USW's bad faith approach, the next contract the union rams through will be similarly devastating.

It is clear from the statements coming from ATI and the USW that if the parties do begin "negotiating in good faith," the only thing they would be negotiating are further deep concessions.

After seven years without a raise, ATI workers want to recoup their enormous sacrifices. Their strike is part of growing signs of militancy, including the walkout by coal miners at Warrior Met in Alabama, nurses in Worcester, Massachusetts, Columbia University graduate students, and educators across the country, who are fighting for adequate pay, good benefits, and safe working conditions.

We call on ATI workers to form rank-and-file committees democratically controlled by workers themselves and independent of and opposed to the unions as well as the Democrats and their functionaries at the NLRB. These committees must fight for workers' demands, including: the recovery of all concessions, across-the-board wage increases, 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, a return to the eight-hour day, and immediate payment of \$900 a week in strike pay from the USW's \$170 million in cash assets. They must fight to broaden their fight, reaching out to autoworkers, teachers, coal miners, health care workers and other sections of the working in the US and internationally.

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



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