

# Steelworkers reject company ultimatum and continue ATI strike

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“They are trying to bully us,” is how one striking worker described Allegheny Technologies ultimatum that the workers end their strike, accept their offer and return to work. “We are not going to take this. Like our sign says ‘the concession stand is closed!’”

The 1,300 steelworkers in Pennsylvania and four other states have been on strike for a month against Allegheny Technologies.

On Friday, ATI issued an ultimatum to the striking workers: accept their current four-year offer by 5 p.m. Monday or they would begin reducing the offer for what ATI called the cost of the strike. Keeping to their word, on Tuesday ATI announced that they are cutting the lump sum payment in lieu of a raise during the first year of the contract from \$4,000 to \$2,500.

The bargaining committee comprised of USW officials from all the locals involved in the strike has rejected the company ultimatum, knowing that these threats have only angered the rank-and-file steelworkers and made them more determined to fight.

On Saturday, ATI will eliminate health care benefits for the striking workers. United Steelworkers officials are telling workers that the benefits will be paid by ATI through COBRA under the CARES Act. However, it is very doubtful that a company which is seeking to replace its workers with scabs will pay for their health care.

For its part, the United Steelworkers has been working to isolate the strike and is prepared to send the workers back without winning any basic demand. The strike has been called an “Unfair Labor Practices” (ULP) 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.” This allows the USW to call off the strike at any time by claiming that the company is now negotiating “in good faith.”

ATI has begun hiring scabs and has stated that they plan to restart production using them and management. The USW has played down this danger, telling workers that the company won’t be able to restore production and, if they do,

customers won’t buy the steel.

The strike, which began March 30, 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.

A group of workers picketing outside the ATI mill in Vandergrift, PA spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site*. They asked that their names not be used. About 170 workers work at the mill that employed nearly 300 in 2015.

Workers at ATI have not had a raise in seven years. The company’s contract offered a lump sum payment with small raises in the remaining three years of the four-year contract. Many workers rejected the idea of a lump sum since it doesn’t get rolled into the wages for the remaining years.

“This doesn’t keep up with inflation,” explained one of the pickets. “Everything has gone up: rent, mortgage, milk. You have to be able to make a living. They want more and more from us, they don’t care about us.”

“If they would invest in their workers instead of their pockets, everybody would be making money right now,” said the striker.

ATI is demanding that all employees pay a percentage of the premiums for health care and that new hires are put on a substantially reduced plan.

One of the strikers explained that he is already on a two-tier system with the pension because he was hired after 2016. “We don’t want a two-tier system. They want to do a two-tier health insurance, they are trying to divide everybody. All the two-tier does is divide everyone even more. I don’t get a pension, I get a 401(k), I think everyone should be the same. It is one union, everyone should be equal.”

“We gave them a year extension,” said another striker, referring to the fact that the previous contract expired in February 2020 but that the United Steelworkers agreed to a one-year extension. “We haven’t had a raise in seven years, just 1 percent. This is how they repay us.”

At the Vandergrift mill, the company has been bringing in

scabs daily. “On the average day 20 to 30 scabs are going in,” said the striker. “Today there were 13.” Those are in addition to management. “Right now they are going through the motions,” the striker added.

The workers are also concerned for the protection of their jobs. The company has cut over 800 jobs since 2015 and is in the process of cutting another 400 jobs. It is ending the production of steel used in appliances and cars 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.

“They are going to make record profits in aerospace sales,” said one of the pickets “and they don’t want to give us anything. “They have \$650 million sitting in the bank, and don’t want to share with us. They are just taking and taking.”

It is important for steelworkers to understand that the United Steelworkers does not represent them or stand for their interests. The USW is bargaining in its role as managers of labor, showing the company that they can push through concessions in exchange for dues.

As ATI hires scabs, prepares to resume production and as its deadline was approaching, the USW sent updates to its members saying that the company is unable to sell its steel and is appealing to workers to attend a shareholders meeting.

“If you own shares in ATI, you have the right to attend their virtual annual shareholder meeting on May 20,” read one of the text messages sent to workers Monday evening as the ultimatum deadline passed.

Workers were instructed to reply with a “1” or a “2,” based on what type of stock they owned, so that they would receive an invitation to the meeting and be told what to do.

In another memo, the USW claimed, “Because ATI cannot deliver orders and must pass on new business due to the ongoing labor dispute, we are getting calls and inquiries from customers asking for options.”

While leaving the strikers isolated, the USW is seeking to divert the struggle of the steelworkers into a corporate campaign, appealing to the stockholders and companies such as Boeing, Airbus and Lockheed Martin to convince ATI to negotiate in good faith.

In fact, it is the financial pressure of Wall Street which is pushing ATI to restructure, cut jobs and costs in order to boost the value for the investors.

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 administration’s National Labor Relations Board, which is likely to rule against the workers.

Last week, USW International Vice President Roxanne Brown spoke at the White House #LeadersSummit on climate change and yesterday International President Tom Conway issued a statement pledging USW support for President Biden’s infrastructure bill.

The USW is hoping that the infrastructure plan will provide a windfall to the union, with lucrative contracts in which the union provides low-cost labor for government projects while collecting increased dues payments to fatten its coffers.

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 government agencies like 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 financial assets.



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