

Steelworkers union offers more concessions as Allegheny Technologies management threatens to bring in strikebreakers

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The United Steelworkers has offered management additional concessions as they continue to isolate the strike by 1,300 steelworkers who are entering the sixth week on strike against Allegheny Technologies in Pennsylvania and four other states.

In the meantime, management is maintaining its hard line, ramping up plans to bring in strikebreakers to restart production.

After seven years without a raise, ATI workers are determined to recoup their enormous sacrifices. Their strike is part of growing signs of militancy, including the walkout by over 1,000 coal miners at Warrior Met in Alabama, nurses in Worcester, Massachusetts, graduate student workers in New York City, and ExxonMobil refinery workers in Beaumont, Texas. After a year of a deadly pandemic, workers are insisting on adequate pay, good benefits and safe working conditions.

The struggles in the US are part of an international movement that has seen struggles on multiple continents, including electricity workers in Turkey and ongoing mass strikes and protests in Colombia.

Instead of seeking to mobilize the power of the working class, the United Steelworkers is seeking to isolate the ATI workers and impose a sellout agreement.

In a series of secret negotiations held last Thursday and Friday, the USW proposed additional concessions to management, with the union pledging to work with the company to cut health care and allow ATI to continue its restructuring, resulting in the elimination of hundreds of additional jobs.

Meanwhile, ATI has begun hiring scabs and has warned that they plan to restart production. The USW has played down this danger, complacently telling workers that the company won't be able to restore production and, if they do, customers won't buy the steel.

As part of the 2016 concessions contract the USW agreed to higher co-pays and deductibles under a 90/10 plan in which workers have to pay up to 10 percent of all health care costs. Now, the USW plans to work with ATI to save the company money by reducing the quality of the benefits offered.

At the same time, the proposal offers a back door to added costs. Instead of raising premiums, the USW's proposal would allow the company to claw back money from workers' profit sharing.

The union bulletin reads, "we also offered a 'safety net' so that if the cost increased the difference would be returned to ATI by reducing the profit sharing by the same amount."

On Friday, Allegheny Technologies rejected the offer, making clear that the proposed cuts did not go far enough. The company is demanding that workers pay a portion of health care premiums equal to 5 percent of the cost of a COBRA plan. The company also wants to expand the already existing two-tier system so that new employees would be paying 10 percent.

The strike, which began March 30, involves five Pennsylvania facilities—Brackenridge, Latrobe, Natrona Heights, Vandergrift and Washington—and at Lockport, New York; Louisville, Ohio; New Bedford, Massachusetts; and Waterbury, Connecticut.

Workers have not received a raise in over seven years. In 2015-16 the company locked out the workers for seven months. During that struggle the USW worked to keep the ATI workers separated from workers at US Steel and ArcelorMittal, whose contracts had also expired, pushing through concessions at all three companies.

On May 1, ATI eliminated health care benefits for the striking ATI workers and sent them letters on how to sign up for health care under COBRA, which allows workers

to continue coverage by paying hefty premiums.

However, it is not clear who will pay the costs. The USW is telling workers to sign up for COBRA, but not to pay the premiums, claiming the company will pay them. However, the company has not agreed to that arrangement, which would in fact defeat the purpose of cutting off the benefits in the first place.

Several workers picketing at one of the gates at the Brackenridge plant spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about the strike.

“I’m tired of concessions,” said a worker from ATI’s Brackenridge facility who has worked at the plant for 14 years. “We gave too much in the last contract and now they keep taking more and more.

“They continue to cut jobs while (ATI’s president and CEO Robert) Wetherbee gets paid millions.”

Since 2015 the company has cut its workforce from 2,200 to roughly 1,300 today. Currently the company is in the process of cutting 400 jobs by eliminating its production line making steel for appliances. The company plans to close its plants in Lockport, New York and Waterbury, Connecticut and cut the number 3 division in Brackenridge.

“They say they want to focus on making steel for aerospace and get out of making steel for appliances,” the Brackenridge worker continued. “We can make steel for both. People need jobs. It doesn’t make sense to have some people working 12 hour shifts and others laid off.”

The USW proposal would not stop the shutdown of plants or layoffs, but only provide those workers affected with a few more benefits.

Another worker with 18 years’ service responded to the company’s hiring of scabs. “They did this during the lockout. Right now, I don’t see them making anything, but whoever heard of a union allowing scabs to take our jobs.”

Asked if they felt that their struggle should be united with the striking workers in the US and around the world, such as Warrior Met coal miners in Alabama, locked out ExxonMobil refinery workers and the striking workers in Turkey and Colombia, the worker responded, “Yes, we’ve all got to unite together. These corporations are all about money, they don’t care about the workers. It doesn’t matter where you are or who you are, they just care about money.”

For its part, the USW has been working to isolate the strike and starve the workers into submission. Only this week, as a face-saving measure, did the USW begin issuing strike benefits out of its \$1.5 billion in assets,

\$260 a week for every striking member.

However, even this pathetic amount is not being sent directly to the workers, but to the local unions, which get to decide how to distribute the money.

Most workers are only receiving a \$150 prepaid Visa gift card, while the rest of the money is being kept by the locals as an emergency reserve. Workers, who for years have had to pay over 1 percent of their pay to the union, are now being forced to beg for additional help to cover health care expenses or prevent utility shutoffs.

ATI workers must take a balance sheet of the role of the United Steelworkers. Despite its name, the USW does not represent the interests of the workers. Instead, it is a well paid and financed part of corporate management whose role is to ensure a reliable workforce.

We call on ATI workers to form rank-and-file committees made up of the most trusted workers, democratically controlled by workers themselves and independent of and opposed to the unions as well as the Democrats and Republicans.

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 massive financial assets.

Workers interested in finding out more should contact the WSWS.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact