

Talks continue in Allegheny Technologies strike as USW seeks to isolate and wear down workers

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Another round of closed door talks between the United Steelworkers (USW) and Allegheny Technologies Inc. (ATI) management is set for Friday as the strike by 1,300 steelworkers continues into its eighth week.

From the start of the walkout, the United Steelworkers has signaled its intent to isolate and wear down the strike in order to force through another round of concessions, reprising its role in the 2015 walkout.

Two weeks ago, the USW presented a contract offer that accepted cuts in employee profit sharing and a continuation of the hated two-tier benefit system for those hired after 2015.

No doubt, the union will offer further concessions in Friday's negotiations. For its part, ATI has made clear that it intends to push for even more cuts. "We are interested in exploring ways to reach an agreement that both rewards our hardworking team and contributes to the longtime viability of ATI," said Natalie Gillespie, a spokeswoman. By "longtime viability," Gillespie means further concessions to boost shareholder profits.

The company continues to hire scabs and has made clear its plans to resume production. Meanwhile, the USW is downplaying this threat, telling workers that ATI will not be able to sell its steel. However, the company has clearly learned some lessons from the 2015-16 lockout and is taking considerable time in training the replacements.

In addition to isolating the strikers, the union is helping the company to starve the workers into submission. While the United Steelworkers itself controls assets of over \$1.5 billion and has over \$150 million in its strike fund, the USW did not issue any strike pay during the first four weeks of the strike. Starting in May, the USW gave each local \$260 per worker, with the locals deciding how to distribute the money. Most of the locals passed along just

\$150 of the money while keeping the rest in an emergency fund from which individual workers could apply for added assistance.

The isolation of the strike and the doling out of a pittance of financial support by the USW is having its intended effect, and the number of workers on the picket line is declining. Pressure on workers is being compounded by the May 1 cutoff of health care benefits by ATI.

"I'm lucky to have this guy with me," said a picket at the company's Brackenridge mill. "Sometimes I'm the only guy here. We are not allowed to stand in the way of the scabs, even yell at them. ATI is filming us, and if we do or say anything, they will retaliate against us."

Most strikers are being forced to find other jobs, unable to live on the weekly \$150 strike pay being given out by the union.

"I have a house payment, utilities and supporting myself and family," said one worker with 15 years' service. "I can't live on \$150 a week.

"We pay union dues all these years, we shouldn't have to beg for money when we go on strike. We are fighting not just for ourselves, but for everyone to have a decent living."

A worker at the ATI Vandergrift plant denounced the union's sabotage of the strike. "We're fighting the USW as well as ATI, which you should not be doing whatsoever. At some point in time, people are going to have to start questioning their morals and values. Do I really want to stand behind an organization that's done this for me?"

Speaking of the conduct of the current strike and the 2015-16 lockout, the worker continued, "It feels like they're trying to wear you down. That bleeds over to your family members. I was so mad after the lockout. We

served all that time out there and didn't get anything near where I thought we should be.

"In that one [2015-16], the USW was always talking about how much they were paying out in strike and defense. I paid dues into this USW at that time for all those years and never touched a nickel of it, and that's money due to us that we put in. A USW rep was the last person I wanted to hear complaining about it. That really sat badly for me."

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

Workers have not had a pay raise in seven years. In its current proposal ATI is demanding that workers' pay raises be offset by increased health care costs. In particular, the company is demanding that starting in the last year of the contract, workers pay 5 percent of health care premiums, with new hires paying 10 percent.

In 2015-16 the company locked out the workers for seven months. During that struggle, the union granted the company most of its demands, including that workers would pay 10 percent of their health care costs and that new hires would be in a two-tier system that eliminated their pension plan.

In the proposal made to ATI by the USW two weeks ago, the union promised that it would keep ATI's health care costs in check by cutting the quality of the benefits and would guarantee that if it failed to meet the target, it would make up the difference by robbing workers' profit sharing payments.

In addition, ATI, with the collaboration of the USW, has continued to cut jobs. Since 2015, the company has cut some 800 jobs. Currently the company is in the process of cutting 400 jobs by eliminating its production line making steel for appliances. It plans to close its plants in Louisville, Ohio and Waterbury, Connecticut and cut the number 3 division in Brackenridge.

The strike against ATI is taking place alongside a small but growing number of strikes throughout the country and internationally that express the determination of workers to regain the massive concessions and sacrifices they have made. These struggles include the walkout by over 1,000 coal miners at Warrior Met in Alabama, 3,000 Volvo Truck workers in Virginia, nurses in Worcester, Massachusetts, graduate student workers in New York City, and ExxonMobil refinery workers in Beaumont, Texas who are also members of the United Steelworkers.

After a year of a deadly pandemic, workers are insisting on adequate pay, good benefits and safe working conditions.

In all of these struggles, workers are learning that they are not only fighting against their respective companies but that they are also up against the very unions that are supposed to represent them. Both the United Mine Workers at Warrior Met and the United Auto Workers at Volvo Truck attempted to ram through concessions contracts, which were decisively rejected by their members.

The ending of the isolation of these strikes, the mobilization of the working class to stop the scabs and the struggle to win improved wages and benefits will require the taking of these struggles out of the hands of the corrupt and pro-corporate unions which are working to sabotage them.

The Socialist Equality Party is working for the formation of rank-and-file committees made up of the most militant and trusted workers. These committees will be democratically run by the members and completely independent of and opposed to the union officialdom and both the Democratic and Republican parties.

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 and a return to the eight-hour day.

To end the isolation of the strike, these committees must demand the immediate payment of \$900 a week in strike pay, along with health benefits for all striking and laid off workers. They will work to mobilize the power of the working class to stop the scabs from crossing the picket line and close down ATI. They will work to unite the struggle at ATI with the struggles of workers throughout the country and throughout the world.

To find out more and to join the rank-and-file committee, please click Build Rank-and-File Safety Committees!



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