

“I’m glad the Volvo workers are fighting back”

# ATI steelworkers defiant as USW continues isolation of 10-week strike

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As the strike of 1,300 steelworkers at Allegheny Technologies (ATI) approaches its eleventh week, workers remain defiant even though the United Steelworkers union (USW) has isolated their struggle and is working feverishly with a federal mediator and the specialty steelmaker to end the strike and impose another pro-company contract.

Today marks 76 days of the strike, which began on March 30 and involves workers in Pennsylvania and four other states in the Midwest and Northeast. After a meeting with a federal mediator and the USW last Wednesday, the company negotiators said no agreement was possible unless workers accepted substantial cuts to health care benefits, including higher premiums and other out-of-pocket payments.

The USW has repeatedly offered cost-cutting concessions, including higher premium payments starting in 2024, but the company has rejected these as inadequate. In addition to healthcare concessions, ATI wants to cut hundreds of jobs and provide meager raises, which barely keep pace with rising inflation, after a seven-year pay freeze.

In the face of management’s intransigence, the USW has continued to isolate the ATI workers, just like it did during the six-month lockout in 2015-2016. But rank-and-file workers want to link up their struggle with other workers, including at Volvo Trucks in Virginia, Warrior Met Coal in Brookwood, Alabama, St. Vincent hospital in Worcester, Massachusetts and ExxonMobil in Beaumont, Texas.

ATI workers who have learned about the strike by nearly 3,000 Volvo Trucks workers in Virginia from the *World Socialist Web Site* have been inspired by the determination of Volvo workers who decisively defeated two sellout contracts pushed by the United Auto Workers (UAW).

“I’m glad the Volvo workers are fighting back like they should,” a worker at the ATI Vandergrift facility in Pennsylvania said. He denounced the UAW for bringing back two rotten contracts and compared it to the situation ATI workers confront with the USW. “It’s like you’re fighting two different entities [the company and the union]. You shouldn’t have to do that in any way, shape or form.”

Summing up the mood of ATI strikers, a worker at the

Brackenridge, Pennsylvania plant told the WWS, “A sticking point for all of us on the line is we’re not giving up jobs. As far as the jobs at Brackenridge, they want to axe about 200. We already lost half our workforce in 2015-2016. No more.”

ATI has axed 900 jobs, nearly half the unionized workforce since the USW betrayed the six-month lockout in 2015-2016.

Workers also oppose company demands for reduction in benefits for new hires. “The minute you give up on pensions, you’ve now created a two-tiered system. Now you’ve got two sets of guys focused on different things. I think that’s another sticking point for most of the guys I’ve talked to down there. Anything that furthers the idea of a two-tiered or three-tiered system is a no-go. I’m never going to be OK with a contract that breaks us apart. I would never be OK with looking a new hire in the face and say his crappy healthcare is my fault.”

Workers are approaching this struggle from the standpoint of what they need. The USW, on the other hand, is acting as an arm of management, subordinating its totally inadequate demands to of the company to lower labor costs and increase their profits, while making impotent moral appeals to management to invest in “human capital.”

In contrast to workers’ opposition to any additional layoffs, the USW blandly stated in its June 9 bargaining update that, “[W]e remain apart over issues that include wages, profit sharing, transfer rights, VEBA, O&T issues and *shutdown provisions* .” In other words, the USW has already accepted ATI’s desired job cuts and is arguing over how many crumbs to allocate to the laid off workers.

This passage is also the only reference in any June bargaining update to the USW-administered Voluntary Employees’ Beneficiary Association (VEBA), which covers retiree healthcare. With the acquiescence of the USW, ATI has been underfunding the union-run VEBA plan for years and if current trends continue, it will run out in the next several years, leaving retirees without their promised healthcare.

The USW is approaching healthcare as a management partner, aiming to help save ATI money without provoking an explosion among workers by introducing premiums. The USW’s June 9 bargaining update exemplifies this perspective,

“Today, management showed up at bargaining and said that their idea of a fully-insured plan was more expensive than the current self-insured plan, something we told them previously would occur.

“As an option, management suggested a ‘discussion document,’ only related to health care that described a cost containment scheme that included an annual ‘cap’ on health care. The offer included a proposal tied to the union’s offer to establish a joint health care committee to contain costs.

“We were willing to explore the idea and accepted the premise of annual caps. Our USW committee then proposed to define the measurements and criteria and made an offer to move the discussion forward.”

In other words, the USW is aiming to demonstrate to ATI that it can get workers to agree to a reworked contract that doesn’t cost ATI any more than their initial proposal. However, the USW refused to bring ATI’s proposed contract to a vote, knowing that workers would vote it down as hopelessly inadequate.

The USW’s proposal is almost identical to the pro-company arrangement the UAW established with Volvo Trucks in 2005, which would shift higher costs onto retirees if there was not enough money in the VEBA trust. The last UAW proposal, rejected by 90 percent of the workers on June 6, includes the clause: “the Company and the Union agree to continue meeting to discuss potential prospective changes” to health benefits.

The USW is seeking to starve workers into submission with poverty-level strike benefits. The USW has been paying only \$150 per week in strike pay, about half the federal minimum wage. This rises slightly to as much as \$175 per week for families, and even this only began weeks into the strike. The USW currently has roughly \$1.5 billion in assets.

The USW has dangled the promise of unemployment benefits because it has defined the walkout out as an “unfair labor practice,” not an economic strike. Under a ULP strike, workers are explicitly prohibited from raising any demands other than that the company “bargain in good faith.”

In a June 10 strike update, the USW finally stated plainly what it has known all along: In a best-case scenario, it will be months before workers receive unemployment benefits. “Time from Initial Determination to First Scheduled hearing: was 2 months. The time from beginning of strike to initial determination: 3 ½ to 4 months.” The strike is currently approaching three months.

However, “Once an initial determination is made, the side that loses can file an appeal and request a hearing before an Unemployment Compensation Referee,” prolonging the process even further. In plain language, if state unemployment officials in Pennsylvania and other states decide to grant unemployment, and this is by no means certain, it will be months before they receive a penny.

In the meantime, the USW has made it clear that it will provide no financial support beyond its miserly strike pay to

help workers keep a roof over their heads and food on the table.

Once the USW judges that workers have been sufficiently worn down, they will follow their 2015-2016 playbook and try to ram through ATI’s contract, presenting cosmetic changes as a “victory.” Given recent meetings between the USW, ATI, and a federal mediator, this will likely happen sooner rather than later.

The USW is trying shut down the strike as soon as possible because the growing wave of militant industrial struggles is creating conditions for workers to unite in common action. Volvo Truck workers in Dublin, Virginia, led by the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee, are showing the way forward for all these struggles. Their courageous stand has evoked powerful statements of support from autoworkers in Mexico, Germany, Detroit, and India .

Taking inspiration from the Volvo workers, an ATI worker said, “Because ATI has put all their eggs in one basket, they’ve put all their finishing capacity in one plant at Vandergrift. This would be a good place to do one of these rank-and-file committees. Without Vandergrift, they wouldn’t be able to send any finished product to customers. It’s insanity taking a concessionary contract after being out so long.”

ATI workers should join the growing network of rank-and-file committees built by autoworkers, educators, Amazon workers and others. The committees must be expanded, and practical steps taken to establish lines of communication and carry out a coordinated counter-offensive. In conducting this fight, workers must reject the anti-Chinese and nationalist poison spewed by USW and the Biden administration and unify with their class brothers and sisters around the world against the multinational corporations and the capitalist system, which has sacrificed millions of lives during the pandemic to enrich the corporate and financial elite. We call on all ATI workers to study the call for the formation of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.



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