

United Steelworkers announces deal with ATI in effort to shut down three-month strike

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The United Steelworkers union (USW) announced Friday that it reached a tentative agreement with Allegheny Technologies (ATI) to end the three-month strike by 1,300 workers at nine facilities in Pennsylvania and other states. In a July 2 statement, USW officials said the strike would continue until the “ratification process is complete,” with a vote on the new four-year deal being “scheduled as soon as possible.”

Top USW officials predictably praised the deal, with International Vice President David McCall, who chaired the negotiations with ATI, saying, “The unity of USW members at ATI has proven that we can accomplish great things when we stand together to fight for the respect and dignity of a fair contract.” In fact, the USW has spent the last three months isolating the embattled ATI workers and condemning them to starvation-level strike benefits of \$150 a week for individuals and \$200 for families.

McCall released no detailed information about the contract. Instead, in the vaguest manner, the USW statement said, “Broadly, the proposed agreement provides lump sum payments, meaningful wage increases and maintains a premium-free health insurance plan for union members without establishing a permanent lower tier of benefits for new hires.”

Long and bitter experience has taught ATI workers that they cannot trust any of the self-serving claims coming out of the USW’s Pittsburgh headquarters. There is no doubt the new deal will benefit ATI and the USW bureaucracy, not the workers, just like the one the USW signed to end the seven-month lockout in 2015-2016. That contract led to the loss of over 900 jobs and a significant worsening of the living standards and working conditions of ATI workers.

ATI workers have not stood on the picket lines for

three months and endured the loss of a quarter of their yearly income to accept another sellout deal. They must demand the immediate release of the full contract, not just the so-called “highlights,” along with all the secret letters of agreement and memoranda of understanding. Workers must have a full two weeks to study and discuss the deal and establish lines of communication with their brothers and sisters throughout ATI and the steel industry to reject their contract with the contempt it deserves.

The USW statement makes no mention of many of the most critical issues in the strike: job security, forced overtime, ending the already existing two-tier system for new hires, and the near bankruptcy of the retiree health care fund. Throughout the strike, the USW has never opposed ATI’s plans for further plant closures and roughly another 400 layoffs, instead saying only that it would get a severance package for workers losing their jobs.

Workers at ATI have not had a wage increase in seven years. Any combination of lump sum payments and small wage increases will do nothing to reverse the years-long erosion of income, not to mention a further cut in real wages due to rising inflation.

The USW claims the agreement prevents ATI from increasing health care premiums, but again nothing can be taken at face value. Over the last several contracts, the USW and ATI have agreed to substandard health and pension benefits for new hires. This system is hated by steelworkers who are forced to work side-by-side with co-workers who are getting vastly different pay and benefits. The two-tier system also incentivizes management to cut the jobs of older workers and replace them with lower-costing new hires.

The USW has long made similar claims about protecting health benefits only to oversee the steady

undermining of medical coverage for current and retired workers, and the shifting of costs from the companies to the workers. The USW-administered Voluntary Employees' Beneficiary Association (VEBA), which covers retiree health care, was negotiated as part of past concessions contracts. With the acquiescence of the USW, ATI has been underfunding the VEBA plan for years. If current trends continue, it will run out of resources in the next several years, leaving retirees without their promised healthcare.

While these funds are legally separate from the USW's ever-growing coffers, the USW benefits directly with massive administration and management fees as well as high-paying jobs that are awarded to family members and cronies.

It is also not clear from the USW's announcement how soon and under what conditions the striking workers would return to work if the deal is ratified. In 2016, after the end of the lockout, workers were forced to work next to managers who had been strikebreakers and the grievance process was suspended, allowing the company to do virtually anything it wanted.

Since March 30, the USW has kept the 1,300 striking steelworkers isolated from the growing number of struggles of other steelworkers, miners, nurses, autoworkers and many more who have gone on strike as part of a growing national and international movement of the working class. This includes 650 USW members locked out by ExxonMobil at its refinery in Beaumont, Texas, and 2,400 miners in Sudbury, Ontario who have been on strike since January 1. Roughly 70 workers at Custom Hoists in Ashland, Ohio walked off the job on June 13. In addition, 1,100 Warrior Met coal miners remain on strike in Alabama and 700 nurses in Worcester, Massachusetts have been on strike since March.

It is no accident that the USW announces a tentative contract at the same time that the United Auto Workers is seeking to end the strike by 2,900 Volvo Truck workers in Virginia and push through another pro-company deal. The initiative taken by the Virginia workers, who set up the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee to organize a fight independently of the corporatist UAW, has sent fear into the hearts of trade union bureaucracies throughout the US and internationally.

ATI workers should begin now to campaign for the defeat of the USW-backed deal. At the same time, it is critical that ATI workers, along with workers at ExxonMobil, US Steel, Cleveland Cliffs, Vale Inco, and other corporations, follow the lead of the Volvo workers and build rank-and-file solidarity committees to provide the leadership necessary to mobilize workers against the corporate-government onslaught on jobs and living standards. These committees must fight for what workers need, regardless of what the companies say they can afford. Their demands should include an end to layoffs, the restoration of all concessions granted by the USW, a return to the eight-hour day, and at least \$900 a week in strike pay.

To mount such a counter-offensive, steelworkers must reject the nationalist poison long used by the USW to divide workers internationally and unite with their brothers and sisters around the world in the global metal, mining and energy industries.

Workers who agree with this perspective should contact the *World Socialist Web Site* today to learn how to join the growing network of national and international rank-and-file committees.



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