United Steelworkers moves to shut down three-month-long strike, while steelworkers express outrage over sellout contract at ATI

Samuel Davidson
13 July 2021

The United Steelworkers (USW) union claimed last night that a contract proposal ratifying hundreds of job cuts had passed and that they are shutting down the three-month strike by 1,300 steelworkers at Allegheny Technologies Incorporated (ATI).

In a mere two-sentence statement issued at 8 p.m., without giving any breakdown or details of the vote, the USW announced that the tentative agreement passed even though voting ended only two hours earlier.

"Contract proposal passes and is accepted by the membership. As we return to work we need to maintain our solidarity and enforce our contract."

The 1,300 steelworkers in Pennsylvania and four other states have been on strike since March 30. The contract negotiated by the USW includes major concessions in wages, health care, job security and retiree benefits. Workers only learned of many contract details on the day of voting, while many others remain hidden from workers and will only become apparent in the coming weeks and months.

The USW has been desperate to end the 106-day strike. It has pushed through a concessions contract which is not much more than a repackaging of the concessions demanded by ATI at the start of the strike.

The USW is especially fearful that the struggle at ATI will get out of their control. There is no doubt union officials were eyeing nervously the developments at Volvo Trucks in Dublin, Virginia, where workers have formed the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee (VWRFC) as part of a rebellion against the continuing attempts by the United Auto Workers (UAW) to sabotage their own month-long strike.

The VWRFC played a key role in the defeat of three consecutive sellout contracts and has worked to link up Volvo workers with workers around the world. Volvo workers in Belgium, shortly after learning of the strike in Virginia, carried out wildcat strikes of their own against a union-backed plan to extend their workweek. Now, the UAW is forcing Volvo workers to vote again on a contract which they rejected last Friday by a 60-40 margin, acting as accomplices for Volvo's own strikebreaking operations.

The next step for steelworkers is to follow the lead of Volvo Trucks workers and begin to build their own alternative leadership in the form of a rank-and-file committee. To mount such a counteroffensive, steelworkers must also reject the nationalist "America First" 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.

There is no reason to believe the USW's claims that the contract was approved by the membership. Striking ATI workers who spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* as voting was taking place expressed outrage over the tentative contract negotiated between the USW and ATI, and expressed their determination to continue to fight.

"This is just another concessions contract," said one worker as he was leaving the voting outside the USW 1196 union hall in Brackenridge, Pennsylvania.

"We are losing jobs. The company is making millions and we are told we can't have anything," said the worker who has worked for 10 years for ATI.

Many workers were especially angry by the removal of the "Inflation Recognition" payment, itself a watered-down version of a Cost of Living Agreement, which was buried in one line of the contract summary.

"I don't like it," said a worker with over 15 years of service, who feared using his name. He went on to criticize the USW leadership for bringing this contract back. "This was largely concessionary and a non-transparent contract. They eliminated our inflationary adjustment. If there was ever a time when we needed it, it is now. We had it in contracts when we didn't need it, when there was no inflation, and now that prices are going up, they give it up."

Apologizing for not wanting his name used, he said, "It shouldn't be this way, but I worry about retaliation."

ATI workers have not had a pay raise in seven years. The contract includes no pay raise the first year and only 3 percent for each of the remaining years.

"Prices have already gone up five-and-a-half percent this year, and it is going to continue and get worse next year," said another worker, pointing out that this means they have already

© World Socialist Web Site

lost the first three years of the contract.

"I don't like the job losses. I guess the leadership of the company is not trying to make steel, they are just trying to make a point," he concluded.

Workers in Brackenridge are very concerned about the loss of jobs. The company has already announced that it is closing the #3 finishing line and closing its factories in Ohio and Connecticut, costing nearly 400 jobs. Many workers may be able to fill vacancies, due to other workers having taken other jobs or retired. However, for the workers in Waterbury, Connecticut and Louisville, Ohio, it would mean moving themselves and their families out of state.

"The contract as a whole is just a giveaway," said a worker who works in the Number 3 Division and whose job is in jeopardy. In a union meeting on the contract, he said, "they wouldn't answer any questions about Number 3. They say we will be able to transfer, but they couldn't say when, and if you went, do you take your seniority with you?

"They can force us to work 12 and even 16 hours a day even while people are laid off. There shouldn't be any overtime when you have people laid off. Only when everyone is called back, then we can discuss it."

Forced overtime has long been an important issue, with ATI forcing workers to work 10- and 12-hour days, sometimes six and even seven days a week. Workers have pointed out that they have sacrificed their family lives while making the company rich.

After the end of the seven-month lockout of 2015-16, workers returned to near-dictatorial conditions in which grievance processes were suspended and management could do what they wanted.

Michelle Jageman, who has been working for ATI for 28 years, explained why she voted no. "I wrote on the ballot 'no freakin' way' and checked the NO box.

"The sad reality is that we sat on that picket line for 106 days and we are taking a concessionary contract. We don't make what we should, we have been taking concessions in every contract since 1994. We are all desperate.

"They are taking away our profit sharing. This company is going to make a whole lot of money. They are getting out of the low commodity steel and only making the high commodity steel. They are going to be making big bucks.

"We also gave up our cost of living. Last contract we gave up our quarterly bonus because we were funding the VEBA (Voluntary Employment Benefit) accounts.

"They are going to put a cap on our health insurance and our prescription at three-and-a-half percent. If you do any kind of research online, the cost of medical goes up five-and-a-half percent yearly. We are going to be in a deficit and they are going to make all of us pay for the deficit.

"We fought so that we would not have to pay premiums, but that is exactly what we are going to find ourselves doing."

Pointing to the union hall, Michelle said "they won't give us a straight answer in there, they won't.

"We are giving up all kinds of stuff, and worse yet, all the money they are taking from us, they are not sticking in the VEBA account, which is for the retirees' insurance. They are projecting that they will be out of money down the road. I'm only 58 and planning to live a lot longer.

"To me, we did not get a lot."

This concessions contract is not the result of the weakness of steelworkers. On the contrary, they occupy an incredibly powerful position. Their strike was part of a growing wave of struggles across the world, including miners, food manufacturing workers, nurses, teachers, Volvo workers and many others. Moreover, steelworkers showed immense determination over the course of their strike.

Rather, it is the product of deliberate sabotage by the USW, which worked to isolate and starve out workers from the beginning. Despite the fact that the USW controls ever-growing assets of over $1.5 billion, workers received no strike pay the first month of the strike and then were forced to live on between just $150 to $200 a week.

The USW has a decades-long record of betrayals, which include: the betrayal of the Phelps Dodge strike in 1984; the shutdown of steel mills throughout the former industrial areas of Pennsylvania, New York, Ohio, Michigan and Indiana; the bankruptcies of LTV, National Steel, Bethlehem and many others; and the destruction of health care and pensions for hundreds of thousands of retirees.

However, this is not limited to the USW. For decades, the unions, controlled by wealthy executives making six figures and joined at the hip with the companies, have played a critical role in enforcing one round of concessions after another. That is why a basic feature of the new wave of class struggle is a growing rebellion against the corrupt union apparatus, which functions to suppress and divide workers, not organize and unite them. Their ability to continue this role is being challenged by a growing rebellion by workers, who are beginning to organize independently and find their voice.

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.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site