

After sellout of ATI strike, what way forward for steelworkers?

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Last week, many workers at Allegheny Technologies (ATI) began returning to work after the United Steelworkers (USW) pushed through a sellout contract to end their 106-day strike against the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania-based steelmaker. Returning workers face intolerable conditions due to the deal, many are yet to be called back and others may never return.

While the USW has not yet released the vote totals on the contract, an unconfirmed report says that the vote was roughly 515 to 425 in favor of ratification, indicating a substantial abstention. There were lopsided “yes” votes at Brackenridge, Washington, and New Bedford and strong “no” votes at most of the other plants. At no plant did striking workers get to monitor the vote counting, leading some to suspect the vote may have been rigged.

Many workers who voted “no” were sickened by being saddled with yet another concessions contract, which will cost hundreds more jobs, under conditions where the high demand for steel as well as a massive order from Boeing put strikers in a potentially strong position.

There is little doubt that most who voted “yes” also detested the concessions, but felt they could no longer hold out under conditions in which they had already sacrificed nearly a third of a year's pay, were being isolated by the United Steelworkers and starved on less than \$200 a week in strike pay. Seeing the USW allowing the picket lines to go unstaffed and the company ramping up production; some felt they had no choice but to return to work.

The contract by no means signals an end to the struggle. First it must be said that no one has yet to see a contract and it most likely does not exist.

Second, just as following the ending of the 2015-16 lockout, workers faced almost dictatorial conditions in

the plant, so too today.

ATI has already made clear that it has no intention of honoring what the USW claimed was agreed. Workers who have returned to work report that they are being forced to work alongside management that scabbed during the strike, and in unsafe conditions. The company has stated that it will not pay the signing bonus and has cut off health insurance to any worker who refuses to work under these conditions.

Third, hundreds of jobs are being cut and ATI is not calling workers back by seniority. At the Brackenridge, Pennsylvania mill, workers on the number three finishing line, which is slated to be closed, have not been told what will happen to their jobs. Workers in the Waterbury, Connecticut and Louisville, Ohio mills that are slated to be closed have not been told when or what to expect.

As workers confront the results of this betrayal, it is important that they take stock of the lessons of the strike, which conclusively demonstrates the role of the USW as a tool of corporate management. A look at the record of the USW substantiates this.

- Over the past 40 years, the USW has been pushing through one concessions contract after another, giving up wage increases, cost of living adjustments, health benefits for retirees, pensions for new hires, and the list goes on.

- Its record includes the betrayal of the Phelps Dodge strike in 1983-84 and other strikes in the 1980s, such as Wheeling Pittsburgh. The USW collaborated in the shutdown of steel mills throughout the former industrial areas of Pennsylvania, New York, Ohio, Michigan and Indiana in the bankruptcies of LTV, National Steel, Bethlehem and many others, along with the destruction of health and pensions for hundreds of thousands of retirees.

• As in the 2015-2016 lockout, the USW worked to weaken and isolate the 2021 ATI strike. Over the same period, coal miners in Alabama, nurses in Massachusetts, oil workers in Texas, auto workers in Virginia, and iron miners in Canada have gone—and many still are—on strike, yet the USW kept the ATI workers separated from them.

• Despite the USW controlling \$1.5 billion in assets and a \$165 million strike fund, most workers have had to leave the picket lines and look for other jobs as they can't support themselves and their families on the \$150 to \$200 a week in strike pay.

• By setting the pattern of concessions at ATI, the USW will seek to push similar concessions on the locked out ExxonMobil workers in Texas.

The USW has itself become a vast holding company, with over \$1.5 billion in assets, much of it tied to the profits of the companies.

It should also be pointed out that not a small part in the decision by the USW to end the ATI strike was in consideration of the Biden administration's massive infrastructure deal being worked out in Congress. The USW sees the potential for further enrichment if their stock holdings rise as steel companies secure lucrative contracts.

The USW feared that a prolonged strike at ATI, above all if it were to link up to the still small, but growing number of strikes throughout the country, would damage their portfolio of steel stocks.

This record of the USW is not the isolated case of one union, but mirrors what is taking place in every union in America and throughout the world.

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the strike by PATCO air traffic controllers, where the refusal of the AFL-CIO to defend strikers paved the way for their mass firing by the Reagan administration. This was a key turning point in the transformation of the unions. Controlled by wealthy executives making six figures and joined at the hip with the companies, the unions have ever since played a critical role in enforcing a huge reduction in the living standards of workers, betraying strikes and bargaining away one hard-won gain after another.

But 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.

Throughout ~~Work~~the strikethe Socialist and the Socialist Equality Party have worked to encourage and assist in the formation of independent workers' rank-and-file committees to organize and lead the struggle.

The action of the Volvo strikers in the formation of the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee, challenging the leadership and organization of the strike by the United Auto Workers, shows that workers are beginning to draw the lessons of these 40 years of betrayals and are breaking from these bankrupt organizations.

The action by the Volvo workers is one expression of a growing wave of radicalization by workers globally. To unify these struggles in a common worldwide movement, the WSWS and Socialist Equality Parties have called for the building of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

The USW was especially fearful that the struggle at ATI would get out of its control and that workers would follow the example of Volvo workers and educators and link up their struggle with the other powerful sections of the working class in the United States and throughout the world.

The next step for steelworkers is to follow the lead of the Volvo Trucks workers and build their own alternative leadership in the form of a rank-and-file committee.

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 WSWS 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](https://www.wsws.org/contact)