

Walkouts at two critical metal production facilities in West Virginia

Naomi Spencer
7 October 2021

The WSWWS urges metal workers to contact us for assistance in establishing a rank-and-file committee.

Huntington, West Virginia-area metal workers at two separate facilities walked out October 1 after their contracts expired without new agreements in place at their respective companies.

Four-hundred-fifty workers at the Huntington Special Metals Corporation plant, and approximately 50 workers at Sulzer Pumps in nearby Barboursville, are picketing around the clock outside their factories to prevent the entry of scab crews. Special Metals workers are organized under the United Steelworkers Local 40; Sulzer Pumps workers are members of the IndustriALL Global Union, an affiliate of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers.

Sulzer Pumps workers are striking over company demands for changes to seniority rights, health care, wages, and layoff policy. At issue in the Special Metals dispute are a large increase in out-of-pocket health insurance costs and a pay raise offer from the company that does not come close to what workers are asking. The company is reportedly demanding employees pay \$1,000 per month for a family health plan, about \$750 per month more than the current cost.

Special Metals workers have received an outpouring of public support on Facebook for their strike. One worker explained that the company was, “Throwing money away on useless projects but not investing back into the machines that run the place. This on top of wanting to cut our wages, raise our insurance and take more of our time that we actually do get off. While everything around us has risen 30 percent in the past year. It’s more than just a small cut in pay.”

Another worker added, “PPE and safety policies come to mind more than anything else for me. They’re only enforced when it’s beneficial to the company from what I’ve witnessed.”

One supporter of the strike in the local community expressed the growing recognition that the fight of the West Virginia workers is part of a broader social conflict: “It’s all

about to blow up across the country. New York is begging for train operators before they have to shut down the subways. People are sick and tired of being treated like disposable assets. I see half the country walking off the job.”

“People are paying higher taxes, food prices have skyrocketed and people’s salaries are staying the same,” said another commenter. “They are overworked and underpaid.”

Although the two plants are only six miles apart, there is no indication that the two unions are in communication with one another, let alone coordinating the work stoppage. Reports from multiple media outlets suggest the unions are discouraging workers, including those at the picket lines, from speaking to the press or the public outside of directing attention to the sparse official statements from the union headquarters.

The unions, acting as little more than spokesmen for corporate management, are fearful of the movement of workers in West Virginia linking up with the broader opposition developing nationally and internationally. Across the US and throughout industries like manufacturing, health care and education, workers are walking out over oppressive conditions and attacks on their living standards. As the Covid-19 pandemic continues to rage around the world, the capitalists are demanding workers stay on the job at the risk of their lives. The cost of the pandemic is being forced onto workers’ backs through unbearable work hours, cuts to compensation or layoffs.

Beyond the shop floor, the assault on living conditions is felt in massive consumer price hikes in basic goods, ongoing supply chain disruptions, the ever-present risk to the health of the elderly in care settings, unvaccinated children required to attend in-person schools, and the refusal of governments to implement lifesaving policies on masking, vaccinations, and closure of nonessential businesses.

In Huntington, the situation is ripe for a broader strike wave to develop. A contract covering 1,000 of Cabell-Huntington Hospital’s nurses and support staff is set to expire November 2. The town’s two hospitals—Cabell-

Huntington and St. Mary's Medical Center—both reached record levels of COVID-19 hospitalizations in September, as the state recorded the highest rate of acceleration of new cases in the country. The ICUs are full and all non-emergency surgeries have been canceled. Meanwhile, the schools are rippling with outbreaks, with no plans to return to remote learning.

This is the direct result of the policies of Democratic President Joe Biden and Republican West Virginia Governor Jim Justice. Both parties, at all levels of government, are in lockstep on keeping the economy running full steam ahead, no matter the cost to public health.

The strikes at Huntington's two metal processing facilities have an objectively strategic significance. The sprawling Special Metals plant is the largest nickel alloy production facility in the world. When Special Metals' parent company, Precision Castparts, was acquired by Berkshire Hathaway in 2016, the \$37 billion deal was characterized as the largest ever made by billionaire CEO Warren Buffett. It is a Fortune 500 company and ranks among the top in the aerospace and defense industry suppliers. *The Oregonian* describes Portland, Oregon based Precision Castparts head Mark Donegan as having "long been among the Northwest's best-paid CEOs" with average annual compensation at \$12.3 million, not including at least \$50 million in stock.

The alloys produced in Huntington are used in military jet engines, commercial aircraft, deep sea oil rig drilling equipment, energy processing facilities and deep-sea oil rigs. On the 130-acre Huntington facility are operated two 35-ton electric arc furnaces, a 24-ton vacuum induction melting furnace, and rolling mills capable of producing metal coils up to 60-feet wide and weighing 15 tons.

Special Metals produces "superalloys" capable of withstanding temperatures of 760 degrees Celsius or 1,400 degrees Fahrenheit. (Consider Venus, the hottest planet in the solar system, is about 475 degrees Celsius.) These are massive, dangerous operations that require a high degree of skill from the workforce to operate safely. According to social media comments by friends and family of striking workers, the company has been working its employees 16 hours a day.

Sulzer Pumps, likewise integral to the global economy, requires a highly skilled workforce for its precision machines and foundry. Sulzer is a Switzerland-based company with manufacturing and service facilities in 180 locations globally. The Barboursville Parts Manufacturing Center produces parts for pumps required for oil refineries, barges and critical water, energy and chemical infrastructure.

Both companies are imposing the impact of global economic slowdown onto the shoulders of their workforces.

On top of the plummeting demand in the airline industry due to pandemic travel restrictions, Precision Castparts/Special Metals also lost a huge chunk of revenue after the Boeing 737 Max fleet was grounded.

Sulzer Pumps chairs Peter Löscher and Greg Pox-Guillaume bragged in a letter to shareholders that the company "rebounded with good momentum" after countries lifted lockdowns and they implemented an aggressive "ramp down" to cut their workforce.

In order to fight back, workers must recognize what they are up against. They face not just individual corporate bosses, but a powerful ruling class of capitalists, their political representatives—and the global capitalist system organized in the interest of their corporate profits. As the pandemic has revealed, the Republicans and Democrats alike, along with the unions who align with the faction presently in power, are united in maintaining this system, no matter the cost to the working class.

Over 708,000 Americans have died from Covid in the past 18 months; worldwide, the official toll has reached over 4.5 million and the reality is likely many times higher. If the pandemic is to be stopped, the working class must stop it. This requires as a start the building of rank-and-file safety committees in every workplace, independent of the capitalist parties and the trade unions.

On October 24, the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) are holding an online webinar to explain the urgent necessity for an eradication policy for COVID-19. A panel of scientists and epidemiologists will provide the critical knowledge necessary to develop a broad-based and international political movement to finally put an end to the pandemic.

We urge all workers to attend, share and help build for this critical event. Contact us to begin setting up rank-and-file committees at your workplace.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact