West Virginia strike against Special Metals enters sixth week

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After rejecting a company contract offer of wage cuts, health insurance premium hikes and other attacks on working conditions, 450 workers at Special Metals Corporation in Huntington, West Virginia, remain on strike for more than a month. A few miles away, 1,000 health care workers at Cabell Huntington Hospital took to the picket lines last week over some of the same issues.

Special Metals workers, members of United Steelworkers (USW) Local 40, have maintained pickets around the clock to secure the many entrances of the massive nickel alloy plant and prevent entry by fleets of scab workers.

Although they are a relatively small section of workers, the strike by these 450 metalworkers has an objective power and significance. The 130-acre Special Metals grounds houses the largest facility of its kind in the world, producing high-temperature-resistant "superalloys" used in aircraft, deep sea drilling rigs and space-related equipment. These materials are critical to the operations of American capitalism, its war machine and the commercial airline and oil industries.

Special Metals is also a crown jewel in the industrial portfolio of Warren Buffett, the head of Berkshire Hathaway with a net worth estimated at $105.2 billion, one of the 10 richest men in the world. The Huntington plant operates as a subsidiary of Oregon-based Precision Castparts, purchased by Berkshire Hathaway in 2016 for $37 billion. At the time it was the largest purchase ever made by Buffett.

The high price tag is an indication of the capitalists' appraisal of the nickel alloy market, in particular, its importance in the context of rising trade and military aggression by the US against its rivals China and Russia. Outside of Precision Castparts facilities, only Russian and Chinese plants can produce specialized alloys on a mass scale. The Biden administration is moving to respond militarily to what it identifies as America's economic disadvantage to China in key industries, including special minerals, industrial equipment, ores and other supplies.

Metalworkers at the Huntington Special Metals plant are highly skilled in a production process harboring many dangers. They are responsible for operating two 35-ton electric arc furnaces, a 24-ton vacuum induction melting furnace, and rolling mills that produce metal coils weighing 15 tons apiece. The workers turn out material that can withstand temperatures up to 760 degrees Celsius (1,400 degrees Fahrenheit).

Special Metals workers are overworked and underpaid. One employee, writing on Facebook, explained, "My job as operator at Special Metals is $15 less than an operator makes at any other alloy plant in the US. We aren't a steel shop; we do high dollar alloys. [It] took 5 years to learn what I do and I've been 27 years doing it. Some orders I handle are half-million-dollar orders but it's not why we're out actually it was the least of our reasons."

The company has long treated its workforce with contempt, working crews 16-hour days, hiring employees only to lay them off again after a few weeks, firing longtime workers for taking sick leave and more.

Since the strike began, workers say the company has called out police to the picket lines half a dozen times over "traffic issues" when trucks were turned away at the gates. In an email to *The Herald-Dispatch*, Huntington, the company insisted the pickets were a safety concern: "As the union conducts its economic strike, we will continue to report improper or illegal conduct on Special Metals' property."

"That's laughable!" commented one worker in response to the statement. "They didn't care about the

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safety of our union family, believe me, they don't care about the safety of anyone inside now. Profits are all they care about. Safety violations inside out the wazoo. OSHA ought to pay a surprise inspection and find out for themselves. Spin, spin, spin it, Special Metals. This is by far NOT an economic strike and I can't wait 'til the courts rule against you on this. This company is as crooked as they come. And in case you're wondering why anyone would want to continue working there? It's because it's one of the few jobs in this area that pay a livable wage and when you support 6 children, you do what you got to do."

As the COVID-19 pandemic approaches its third year, manufacturing workers across the US are walking off the job. Three-quarters of a million Americans have died from COVID. And while it is known that factories and other mass workplaces are primary vectors of community transmission, safety conditions in the plants have not improved. Instead, companies and their corporate executives, shareholders and political representatives have demanded workers get back to work producing profits. In many cases, production lines are running with short-staffing levels, leading to even more dangerous conditions beyond the ever-present risk of contracting COVID-19.

The situation is ripe for a rebellion. The main obstacle workers face to winning their fight are the trade unions, including the United Steelworkers, who act as an industrial police force on behalf of management. Where the USW has not been able to prevent strikes, it has called isolated walkouts aimed at exhausting and wearing down the militancy of workers.

While sitting on $1.5 billion in assets and a $165 million strike fund, the USW starves workers with poverty strike pay aimed at imposing debilitating concessions contracts. The sellout of a 106-day strike at Allegheny Technologies (ATI) earlier this year is typical. Only a matter of months after smashing the strike, profits are surging at ATI, with a $48.7 million gain in the third quarter.

Just 200 miles to the north of the Huntington Special Metals facility, USW Local 3057 workers are also on strike at a massive ArcelorMittal Tubular Products plant in Shelby, Ohio. Yet the USW has done nothing to link up striking workers under its own union, let alone encourage the unity of workers across industries. In Huntington, Special Metals workers are left on their own to make appeals to the community on social media for the most basic supplies, including firewood to keep their picket line barrels burning as the nights dip below freezing.

The critical issue facing workers is develop their own initiative through the building of a rank-and-file committee independent of the USW to unite Special Metals workers with workers at ArcelorMittal and other workers coming into struggle, such as at farm equipment maker John Deere. Workers seeking more information should contact the WSWS.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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