

Strike by Huntington, West Virginia metalworkers passes 100 days

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A strike by 450 metalworkers has passed the hundred-day mark at Special Metals, a nickel alloy plant in Huntington, West Virginia. Workers downed tools October 1, 2021, after the company demanded a massive hike in employee health insurance premiums in tandem with a pay cut.

Since then, United Steelworkers union Local 40 representatives and company officials have made no progress in negotiations, with management intransigent in its concession demands. The company proposal will force workers to pay 50 percent of a \$2,900 premium for a family plan, an increase of 350 percent over previous premiums.

Special Metals has used scabs to keep operations running from the first day of the strike. Officials have told local media they have “contingency plans in place to keep the plant operating” no matter how long the strike continues. On social media, workers have said the scabs are contracted through March.

In response, the USW has taken no measures to hinder the strikebreakers or mobilize broader support in the working class behind the strike. Left isolated by the USW, the workers have relied on local community donations for food and fuel to keep pickets manned in freezing weather.

Over the Christmas holidays, 75 of the strikers (about 16 percent of the total unionized workforce) received notice of layoffs. Most of the workers are in the facility’s bar and wire production line, which the company says will face a permanent downsizing effective February 7.

In an anonymous Facebook post one worker expressed the sentiments of many; “I’m a member of local 40 and I feel this needs to be brought to the public to hear. I have heard from multiple sources now from within the plant that the company has no intention of

offering a fair contract in this upcoming bargaining session. They are dead set on breaking the union up and was also told and confirmed by someone else that if this is going to end it won’t be until March or April. The company is behind on orders as it is and can’t do it with the current scab labor, but they’re still being stubborn and vindictive about this. I hope I’m wrong and they offer a fair contract this coming week but I’m not getting my hopes up.”

The plant employs a relatively small number of workers, but as the largest nickel alloy producer in the world, it is of strategic significance to the American military and to the oil, aerospace and airlines industries. At its 100-acre facility, Special Metals workers manufacture “superalloy” materials that can withstand high-pressure environments like those in deep sea drilling and space flight.

On January 5, Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders hosted a “virtual town hall” where he rehashed many of his presidential campaign talking points about inequality, while boosting the pro-corporate trade unions. Sanders also issued an appeal to Warren Buffett, billionaire CEO of Berkshire Hathaway, which owns Special Metals’ parent company Precision Castparts, to pressure Special Metals to reach a settlement.

Buffett predictably dismissed Sanders’ pathetic pleas. “Our companies deal individually with their own labor and personnel decisions (except for the selection of the CEO),” Buffett wrote to Sanders. “We have never purchased or sold a company because of its union or non-union status. Some of our companies have as many as a dozen unions; others have none.”

Sanders’ entry into the situation indicates the seriousness with which sections of the business establishment view the strike, and more broadly, their

concern over the growing militancy of the working class against COVID-19 and the growing opposition to further concessions. Raging inflation, dangerous working conditions, 12-hour shifts and stagnating wages are propelling workers into confrontations with their employers. It is telling that Sanders, for all his supposed concern for the living standards of American workers, breathes barely a word about the pandemic that has ravaged the US and the rest of the world.

Sanders' own Democratic Party, under the leadership of the Biden administration, has overseen a world-historic catastrophe for the working class. Almost one million have died, millions more have been debilitated, suffered the loss of loved ones, and seen their lives upended to uphold the profit interests of corporations, Wall Street, and the richest people in the world. No wonder Warren Buffett laughs at the senator's bluster. The Democrats and their trade union allies seek desperately to strangle the struggles of working people in order to protect the wealth of this rapacious ruling class.

Workers must break the political and organizational stranglehold of these entities. The isolation and betrayal by the USW of the nearly nine-month lockout of Beaumont, Texas ExxonMobil oil workers must serve as a warning to the Huntington strikers.

To break the isolation of the struggle, Special Metals workers must take the fight into their own hands by forming a rank-and-file committee. Conditions exist for workers across industries to organize a powerful strike wave. In Huntington alone over the past few years, thousands of teachers, nurses and factory workers have fought back against attacks on their living conditions.

Special Metals workers must consciously fight to link of their strike with other workers coming into struggle, such as the 30,000 USW members in the oil industry, including at Marathon facilities in Huntington and Catlettsburg, Kentucky, whose contracts will expire at the end of the month. Workers interested in helping to build a rank-and-file committee should contact the WSWS.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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