

Sellout at Arconic: The latest showdown between workers and the unions

Tom Hall
2 June 2022

The contract battle at aluminum maker Arconic is the latest episode in a growing struggle between the working class and the pro-corporate trade unions.

Wednesday night, the United Steelworkers claimed the ratification of a substandard contract covering over 3,000 workers, sparking an eruption of anger and suspicions of ballot fraud among the rank and file. There were conflicting reports about the margin of victory, with some sources claiming a 60-40 vote breakdown and others a razor-thin margin of 51-49.

Earlier last month, Arconic workers voted nearly unanimously to authorize strike action. This was a powerful expression of their determination to make up for years of concessions and to prevent their further impoverishment through runaway inflation. But instead of organizing a struggle, the USW kept workers in the dark before suddenly announcing a deal at the last minute. The contract contains wage increases well below the current inflation rate of 8.3 percent, with 7 percent the first year and 4.5 percent the following three years.

Workers were furious over the deal, prompting censorship by the union on their local Facebook pages, where comments were deactivated. In the meantime, workers created their own Facebook group, which has attracted several hundred members, to provide themselves with a forum for democratic discussion outside of the union's control.

The *World Socialist Web Site* urges Arconic workers to immediately develop this initiative through the formal organization of a rank-and-file committee, independent of the USW officialdom and controlled by workers themselves. Workers must demand a rank-and-file recount of the balloting. No confidence can be placed in the integrity of a voting process controlled entirely by the union bureaucracy.

The fight at Arconic is the latest demonstration that the unions are no longer workers' organizations in any meaningful sense but bought-and-paid-for management stooges.

Certain general features have emerged in various struggles

over recent months. Unanimous or near-unanimous strike authorization votes demonstrate a willingness of workers to fight, but strike action is then blocked by the unions or isolated to only a few days or to a fraction of the workforce. The unions then abruptly announce a sellout deal, almost always containing wage increases equal to half the rate of inflation or even less, which would lead to substantial cuts in real wages over the life of the contract.

The unions organize a snap vote, in which balloting takes place under opaque conditions controlled by bureaucrats pushing for a "yes" vote. In some cases, the unions are unable to push it through the first time, only to put to a second vote a virtually identical deal, and eventually the union declares the contract passed.

In addition to Arconic, other struggles following this pattern include:

- Detroit Diesel, where workers voted by 99 percent to authorize a strike and rejected an initial contract proposal by a four-to-one margin. The United Auto Workers, whose president Ray Curry sits on the board of Detroit Diesel's parent company, eventually rammed through a deal containing cumulative wage increases of only 10 percent over six years;

- Three thousand car haulers in the auto industry were prepared to strike midnight Tuesday when their current contract expired, but the Teamsters announced a deal at the eleventh hour and kept workers on the job;

- Fifty-five thousand Los Angeles County public sector workers voted to authorize strike action, but the Service Employees International Union instead brought back a deal with wage increases of between 3.25 and 5.5 percent;

- A strike by 500 Chevron workers at a refinery in Richmond, California was left isolated by the United Steelworkers, which rammed through a sellout national agreement in collaboration with the Biden administration. USW President Tom Conway openly boasted that the national deal was "non-inflationary," that is, contained substandard pay increases. The union later forced through a deal at Richmond after isolating striking workers for two

months;

- In Houston, 2,800 janitors were prepared to strike Tuesday night, but this was called off by the SEIU, which announced a tentative agreement the following day. The janitors are highly exploited, largely immigrant workers who currently make only \$10.75 an hour before union dues are deducted;

- Throughout the Midwest, a strike by 1,100 agricultural equipment workers at CNH has been isolated by the UAW for more than a month.

To this list must be added the growing struggle of nurses throughout the United States. While the unions have worked to isolate strikes—including at Stanford in April and May, and an ongoing strike in New Jersey—rank-and-file nurses have organized independently to wage a powerful campaign against the victimization of RaDonda Vaught and against unsafe staffing ratios.

The AFL-CIO and other official unions are controlled by a privileged bureaucracy, drawing six-figure salaries from nine-figure union assets, that is financially dependent upon its ability to enforce a pro-corporate labor “peace.” Their aim is not to organize a struggle by workers for better pay and working conditions, but to suppress strikes, ram through sellouts and defend the “right” of companies to profits.

The social function of the unions as a labor police force is shown by official wage figures in the United States, which increased overall by 4.7 percent last year, a substantial spike (but still far below inflation) driven by a labor shortage which has objectively strengthened workers’ bargaining position. But the increase among *unionized* workers was far lower than the national average, at only 3.3 percent from March of 2021 to March of 2022. In other words, the unions themselves have played a key role in limiting pay increases.

These figures recall the profound observation by Leon Trotsky in the 1930s: “The character of a workers’ organization such as a trade union is determined by its relation to the distribution of national income.” Should the trade unions “defend the income of the bourgeoisie from attacks on the part of the workers; should they conduct a struggle against strikes, against the raising of wages, against help to the unemployed, then we would have an organization of scabs, and not a trade union.” This is, in fact, exactly what the unions have become.

In order to deal with a growing rebellion from below, the unions are developing closer and more intimate ties with the capitalist state. This is the meaning of President Biden’s pledge to be the most “pro-union president in American history” while attacking workers’ wages through measures such as a hike in federal interest rates. He is seeking to develop a corporatist labor-management-government structure through which the class struggle can be suffocated,

and labor discipline enforced at home to prepare for wars abroad.

In addition to the national refinery contract, worked out in close collaboration with the USW, the administration has well-advanced preparations with both port operators and the International Longshore and Warehouse Union to prevent work stoppages on the West Coast ports when the contract for 20,000 longshoremen expires on July 1. In the railroad industry, where workers have been without a national contract for two years, the unions are appealing to Biden and Congress to intervene to unilaterally enforce a settlement. A federal judge recently intervened to block a strike against a punitive new attendance policy at BNSF, a clear indication that any intervention would be on the side of management.

Between the unions and the working class is a collision of fundamental social interests. All over the world, workers are rising up against the skyrocketing cost of living, the subordination during the pandemic of public health measures and human life to profit, and the reckless wars of American and world imperialism. But the unions, integrated both financially and institutionally with corporations and dependent upon support from the capitalist state, respond not by yielding to popular pressure from below but by striving ever more openly and nakedly to suppress it.

But the union apparatus cannot hold back the wheel of history. Workers are being driven into struggle by the global breakdown of the capitalist system, which is incapable of resolving any the basic social problems confronted by modern society and is in fact the cause of these problems. Every fresh betrayal by the union bureaucracy only further discredits these institutions and radicalizes the workers.

The struggle at Arconic, and among other sections of the working class throughout the US and internationally, requires the development of independent organizations, coordinated and unified in the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

For information on forming a rank-and-file committee, fill out the form below.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact