

“They’re trying to ram the same thing down our throats”: US Steel worker in Gary, Indiana, denounces USW-Cliffs sellout deal

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Are you a steelworker? We want to hear from you about conditions in your workplace. Contact us by filling out the form at the bottom of this article. All submissions will remain anonymous.

The United Steelworkers union is preparing to impose a concessionary contract on workers at US Steel mills in the United States, which is similar to the one the USW agreed to with Cleveland Cliffs last month. The union claims that US Steel has proposed a 13 percent wage increase over four years with 3 percent in the first three years and 4 percent in the final year. In a message sent to members, it decries that this is “nowhere near the standard set by Cliffs.”

In reality, the Cleveland-Cliffs tentative agreement with the USW contained higher but still wholly inadequate pay increases amounting to 20-22 percent over four years. This is less than 6 percent per year and well below the current rate of inflation that is hovering around 8.5 percent.

The USW’s memo also listed “significant health care changes,” rejection of additional vacation and holiday time off for workers, rejection of pension increases and “holding the ratification bonus hostage if we don’t agree” as concessions that were dragging out the negotiations. Since local bargaining began in June and master negotiations in July, the USW has kept rank-and-file workers largely in the dark while it negotiated with the steel bosses and extended contracts to prevent a strike.

The union has attempted to strike a militant pose with carefully crafted messages to rank-and-file workers at US Steel, in contrast to the placid tone of its member updates on the Cleveland-Cliffs contract. But for all of its posturing, it is the same USW that negotiated the

sellout tentative agreement with Cliffs and that blocked a strike of 30,000 steelworkers after a unanimous strike vote in 2018.

A US Steel worker from Indiana spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* after responding to the article “Vote ‘No’ on USW phantom deal with Cleveland Cliffs.”

“As a maintenance electrician at US Steel Gary Works, I have a lot of safety concerns. I’ve been there since 2018, and I was excited when I got hired, because my whole family for three generations worked as steelworkers. But despite that, my experience at US Steel has been one of the worst I’ve had to deal with in my whole life.

“I was on a call on the midnight shift one day. I had no knowledge of the area I was sent to before I was in there, but management knew about the problems. They never relayed that information to us. There was actual water going onto live electricity, and there were wires popping and sizzling. I took a video of it. Me and another coworker ran out of there.”

He raised his concerns to the USW representatives in the plant, who refused to resolve the dangers. “The union reps blew smoke and backed me into a wall, and OSHA never found anything. You can’t turn your head away from this. But the union says there’s nothing they can do about it, and that’s not just at the local level, but all the way up to international.

“The first inclination of the company in a situation like that is to blame the person who went down there to say they shouldn’t have been there. Well, the management told us to go there and didn’t tell us about the situation. Our union allows it to keep going on, they are really not there to protect us, but to line their pockets. The grievance process sells out Charlie to save

Paul.”

The worker alluded to the decades of concession contracts in which the USW negotiated terms that whittled away at funds for training workers. This has exacerbated already-existing dangers of working in a steel mill. Steelworkers in the US are regularly working in conditions with extreme temperatures, vehicles moving in yards at all hours, exposure to live electricity and cancer-causing chemicals which leads to the serious injuries and deaths of steelworkers every year.

“They need to train us better, yet they don’t want to give us the tools and resources to progress. The union and company intimidate workers and make them scared. But in the long term, individuals need to think about what they’re sacrificing. It’s like what you wrote in the article on the Cleveland-Cliffs contract. Where is the fine print? Are those ‘raises’ based on production? We don’t know, and they’re trying to ram the same thing down our throats,” he said, referring to the contract negotiations underway at US Steel.

“Look at the contract now that’s in negotiations now. They never gave us anything on safety, nothing during COVID for pay, and we were barely working 40 hours a week. Just 13 percent over four years when inflation is almost 9 percent. They want us to go into some express PPO, which cuts into the type of treatment you can get. The union and them are all in it together. If the US Steel president doesn’t take the insurance, then why should we?

“The workers who go through this need to stand up. If you don’t stand up, what is going to change? The workers are the ones with the power to shut the place down. I know people are scared to lose their jobs. Who can you turn to? Mentally, that’s the game they play.

“There is also a lot of racial profiling there,” the worker added. “They try to segregate all minorities from white workers based on where they work in the mill. The union fails to do anything about it. I’ve raised concerns about safety and prejudice, and when I did, the union was with the management 100 percent.”

The worker said that he did not believe the Democratic or Republican parties represented workers’ interests any more than the unions. “It’s political, and someone is always getting paid. Just like your article about the USW president having a discussion with Biden to shut down strikes [of oil workers]. In Indiana it is so conservative, they could care less about

workers.”

This reporter discussed the need to build rank-and-file committees to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the pro-company USW officials. As part of the fight to transfer power from the union apparatuses to rank-and-file workers on the shopfloor, Will Lehman, a Pennsylvania Mack Trucks worker, is running for president of the United Auto Workers.

The steelworker responded to acknowledge the deep ties between the struggle of auto and steelworkers. “A lot of the steel we produce at the hot strip mill in Gary goes to the auto industry. Some of it goes to construction also. I’m interested in learning more about Will’s campaign.”

Steelworkers who are ready to take a stand against another sellout contract and who want to turn to their fellow workers to build a rank-and-file committee can sign up with the form below.



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