

United Steelworkers seeks to isolate workers at US Steel as it pushes concessions contracts at Cleveland-Cliffs

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The United Steelworkers union (USW) announced last month that 2,000 Cleveland-Cliffs workers at its iron ore mining and pelletizing facilities had ratified a new four-year agreement at northern Minnesota and Michigan's Upper Peninsula. The union claimed the deal passed "overwhelmingly," without releasing any results.

Another 12,000 Cleveland-Cliffs workers at the company's steel production facilities, also members of the USW, are currently awaiting the results of a mail-in vote on a tentative agreement announced August 27. The USW posted on its webpage that votes on this contract would be tallied tomorrow, October 12.

USW District 11 Director Emil Ramirez, who chaired the negotiations for the mining contracts, said, "Our work will be more prosperous and our jobs more secure with the new contract in place." The deal, he claimed, "ensures that the standard of living for USW members, our families and communities will continue to improve." The USW made the same claims about the iron ore deal, claiming it "features significant wage and benefit improvements" and a company "commitment to invest in the future of the USW represented facilities."

The four-year deal covering iron ore miners and steel mill workers includes a 20 percent pay hike, which amounts to an average annual increase of 5 percent, well below the current rate of inflation of 8.26 percent.

Vacation time remains inadequate for workers who regularly work 70 hours per week in dangerous conditions, barely seeing their families for days at times. Workers with one to five years of seniority are granted only two weeks' vacation per year, and it will take a worker 30 years of continuous work under stressful conditions to earn six weeks.

No signing bonuses were doled out to workers. Although such bribes are routinely used to pressure workers to sign deals they know are against their interests, USW and Cliffs officials insultingly cited the "wages that are with you

forever and count toward future earnings" as a reason for not including a bonus.

The agreements will continue the decades-long erosion of steelworkers' living standards and working conditions. There are also no measures to guarantee safer working conditions in America's highly dangerous mines.

The USW and other unions are colluding with the Biden administration to impose the full burden of the inflationary crisis on the backs of workers. In February, after secret meetings with the White House, USW President Tom Conway blocked a strike by 30,000 oil refinery and petrochemical workers and signed a government-dictated deal, which Conway boasted "did not add to inflationary pressures." Indeed, the deal included 2-3 percent pay increases and nothing to protect workers against the cost-cutting measures of the massively profitable energy companies, as witnessed by the September 20 fire at the BP Husky oil refinery where two USW workers, Max and Ben Morrissey, were burned to death.

Cleveland-Cliffs is the largest US-based raw steelmaker after the acquisition of the majority of ArcelorMittal's US operations in September 2020. Prior to the acquisition, Cleveland-Cliffs primarily operated in mining minerals used in the raw steelmaking process. The USW was present in many Cleveland-Cliffs mines in North America and worked with the corporation to push through sellout contracts as it has for years in the steel, aluminum, auto and other industries.

The USW played a key role in ensuring that the acquisition of ArcelorMittal USA would help Cleveland-Cliffs achieve its goals for cost savings, not least of all for labor. Mike Millsap, USW District 7 Director for Indiana and Illinois, told the *Chicago Tribune* in September 2020, "We (USW) have bargained with Cleveland-Cliffs. They bought AK Steel a while back. Overall, our relationship has been very good."

In the aftermath of the AK Steel acquisition, steelworkers

lost jobs, and real wages continued to plummet for workers in contract after contract. Working conditions in the facilities previously run by AK Steel did not become any safer for workers.

Millsap told the media that the USW would benefit from Cleveland-Cliffs being based in the US, as opposed to Luxembourg-based ArcelorMittal. This underscores the USW's nationalist orientation and support for the trade war measures by the Trump and now Biden administration.

International USW President Tom Conway rose through the ranks of the union not on the basis of fighting for workers' rights, but as a reliable business partner in negotiations with steel companies that ensured the profit interests of the corporations would be protected from organized working class opposition. His biography on the USW website boasts that "Conway also has directed USW negotiations with AK Steel and Goodyear Tire and Rubber Co. since 2006"—the same AK Steel that Cliffs acquired earlier.

The resume of the corporate hack continues: "Conway led talks with U.S. Steel in 2008, 2012 and 2015, when the industry was on the verge of crisis again because of illegally traded steel. In 2018, with the industry improving, USW members under Conway's leadership successfully fought off concession demands and ratified a new four-year agreement covering 16,000 workers that significantly increased pay and included a signing bonus."

These contracts were pushed through in 2018 after the USW blocked a strike of 30,000 steelworkers and pushed through a contract that offered no job protections, safety improvements or substantial wage increases for workers. The contract was rammed through after the union released only "highlights" and refused to allow workers to read and study the full contract beforehand. Thousands of steelworkers lost their jobs after the contracts were pushed through and the reactionary tariffs took their toll in the form of retaliatory tariffs and metals price inflation.

Workers are tired of the constant refrain of the union that they are fighting for improved safety measures in every contract. If that were true, why are workers continuing to die in the mills? The truth is each contract the union negotiates to ensure "international competitiveness" and "profitability" for the companies paves the way for job cuts and increased incentives for the companies to hire contract labor. Despite the corporatist "labor-management partnership" drivel from the USW bureaucracy, the drive for ever-greater profits and the protection of workers' safety are totally incompatible.

As contract voting was taking place, a 44-year-old worker died September 17 "as a result of injuries sustained during a routine repair activity" at the Cleveland-Cliffs Indiana Harbor Mill in East Chicago, Indiana. The worker, whose

death was initially reported in the *Northwest Indiana Times*, tragically had his life cut short by the grueling work conditions, which the USW has done nothing to address even after a young steelworker was seriously injured at the same mill less than two months before. District 7 Director Millsap said little about either of the two preventable tragedies other than to state to the press that the USW is carrying out an investigation alongside the company as part of its joint labor-management safety agreement. This will only result in a whitewash of the corporation and union's responsibility.

Like its counterpart in the AFL-CIO, the United Auto Workers union, the USW functions as a business partner in negotiations with the companies and is completely opposed to the interests of workers during contract negotiations. Union bureaucrats are paid six-figure salaries from workers' dues money and have vastly different conditions from workers in the mines and mills.

Workers at US Steel facilities face the same concession demands that the union is attempting to force on their brothers and sisters at Cliffs. Additionally, US Steel workers are threatened with even larger wage cuts and limitations to health care providers if they do not accept higher health benefit premiums. The USW is blocking out critical information on the negotiations from workers and is keeping them isolated from workers in the metals, mining and rubber industries, the energy industries and the transport, rail and auto struggles spreading across the US and the world.

Workers must prepare to fight back under a program to defend their own interests. In opposition to the pro-capitalist and nationalist program of the USW apparatus, workers must build rank-and-file committees to take power on the shop floor. These committees should fight to unite US workers with their class brothers and sisters throughout the global steel industry.

In this, steelworkers should follow the examples of the Rail Workers Rank-and-File Committee and the United Auto Workers presidential campaign of Will Lehman.

If you are interested in forming a rank-and-file committee to fight back against the corporations and union bureaucracy, fill out the form below for the *World Socialist Web Site* to get in contact with you:



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