

Locked out WestRock paper mill workers in Alabama reject company's offer for third time

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For the third time since being locked out by the company last October, over 400 United Steelworkers (USW) members in three different locals at WestRock's Mahrt Mill paper mill in Cottonton, Alabama have voted down the company's contract proposal. On January 4, workers rejected the company's "last, best, and final offer" and courageously continued to press their demands.

The previous contract expired in November 2021, with the USW agreeing to repeated extensions. Workers at the mill rejected the company's first offer last September, and voted it down again on October 1, precipitating the lockout. They continue to oppose the company's efforts to remove a "penalty" clause in the current deal that guarantees overtime pay. Workers at the mill report that shifts that can stretch up to 16 hours are not uncommon. Workers are also resisting cuts to health care benefits.

In response to the recent contract rejection, Robby Johnson, manager of corporate communications for WestRock stated, "WestRock is disappointed by the voting results and is aligning its next steps, which include continuing to operate the paper mill, until an agreement is approved and ratified."

However, the USW has announced no measures to expand or develop the struggle, instead continuing its policy of isolating the strike. Reflecting the economic hardship inflicted by the strike and the refusal of the USW to provide adequate strike pay, despite controlling over \$1 billion in net assets, dozens of workers have either retired or resigned from their position since the lockout began.

As of this writing, there have been no posts on the union's Facebook page about the latest contract

rejection. In fact, the USW leadership has not issued a single public statement on the recent contract rejections or the ongoing lockout, aside from a few cursory remarks from USW District 9 Director Daniel Flippo last October.

Meanwhile, the heads of the three USW locals at Mahrt Mill are aiming to drag out the strike and wear down workers behind the facade of "good faith" bargaining until they force workers to capitulate to the company's demands. After the rejection of the company's "last, best, and final offer," Local 971 President Bobby Watson said that "We're hoping within 12-16 months that we can get the staff back up and get those issues corrected," with Les Phillips, president of Local 1972, adding that he was hopeful the union and the company "can all be reasonable and get it done."

While the union bureaucracy attempts to starve workers out financially by withholding resources, the company has taken all the measures necessary to maintain its profit margins, sending in workers from its other mills such as in Lanett, Alabama to keep the Cottonton mill running.

The vote by workers at WestRock's Mahrt Mill continues the wave of "no" votes returned by workers against wage-cutting concession contracts negotiated by the unions, including by autoworkers, teachers, food processing workers, health care workers, miners and, most recently, New York nurses.

After working without a contract for three years, Class I railroad workers in the US voted down sellout agreements dictated by the rail carriers in collaboration with the union bureaucracy and the Biden administration. After failing to force through

ratification votes, the US Congress and President Joe Biden pushed through dictatorial anti-strike legislation to block 120,000 railroaders from striking last month.

To win their fight against WestRock, a Fortune 500 transnational packaging corporation with locations on five continents, Mahrt Mill workers must develop and expand their struggle by breaking free of the stranglehold imposed by the USW bureaucracy.

According to a statement from President and CEO David Sewell to the company's shareholders in its "2022 Annual Report and 2023 Proxy Statement," the company intends to defend at all costs its "record financial results" achieved in fiscal year 2022.

Sewell (formerly president of Sherwin-Williams), whose "total compensation" was \$21 million in 2021, stated in the 2022 report that "On a year-over-year basis, net sales increased 13% to \$21.3 billion," while "net income increased 13% to \$945 million." The company "generated \$2.0 billion in net cash from operating activities."

Sewell recently boasted that his company "repurchased \$600 million of WestRock's shares in fiscal 2022 and increased our dividend by 4 percent. And in October, we announced an additional 10% increase to our dividend, bringing our dividend increases to 37.5% since February 2021."

The repeated attempts by the USW to shut down the struggle by WestRock workers continues the pro-management policies it has conducted in other industries, including steel, aluminum, mining, as well as oil and chemicals.

In February 2022 the USW worked hand-in-glove with President Joe Biden, the self-proclaimed most "pro-union president in American history," to prevent a strike by 30,000 US refinery workers last year and impose a sellout deal, which USW bureaucrats boasted "did not contribute to inflation."

In May of 2022 the USW betrayed a powerful strike by 3,400 Arconic aluminum workers, imposing a below inflation pay increase, and just last month helped rammed through a wage-cutting deal at US Steel in December that contains no protections for jobs or safety.

The USW has also sat by as WestRock shuttered its mills in Panama City, Florida and St. Paul, Minnesota last April and October, and did nothing to stop International Paper from shuttering its plants in

Franklin, Virginia, in 2009 and in Courtland, Alabama, in 2014. While railing demagogically against globalization, Conway never once calls for mass nationwide walkouts in support of its members at the idled Century Aluminum plant in Hawesville, Kentucky or for the USW Local 1017 members who lost their jobs after the GE Lighting plant in Logan, Ohio closed last year.

While betraying and isolating strikes in the US, USW President Tom Conway has fully lined up behind Washington's trade war measures against China and the US NATO war drive against Russia.

Mahrt Mill workers should take stock of this damning balance sheet. To win their fight Mahrt Mill workers must break the isolation being imposed by the USW and wrest their struggle out of the hands of the union bureaucrats by forming their own independent rank-and-file strike committee. This committee, composed of the most trustworthy and determined members, should solicit support from WestRock workers in Demopolis, Alabama, Fernandina Beach, Florida, Florence, South Carolina, in addition to USW members at International Paper plants, and call for all USW members to down their tools in support of their courageous struggle. Workers in other industries throughout the country and internationally should be contacted to support their struggle based on the principle, long abandoned by the union officialdom, that an injury to one is an injury to all. We encourage WestRock workers to contact the WWSWS for more information about forming a rank-and-file committee at your workplace.



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