

As lockout at WestRock paper mill in Alabama enters fifth month, company holds job fair to keep mill running with scab labor

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31 January 2023

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As the lockout of over 400 workers at WestRock's Mahrt paper mill in Cottonton, Alabama enters its fifth month, the company is hiring scab labor up its operations to keep the mill running.

The previous contract expired in November 2021 for workers in United Steelworkers Locals 971, 1471 and 1972, but workers were locked out after twice rejecting the company's offer last September and October by wide margins.

The workers once again rejected the company's "last, best, and final offer" on January 4. Major issues include the company's efforts to remove a "penalty" clause in the current deal that guarantees overtime pay, as well as resisting cuts to health care benefits. Local 1972 president Les Phillips said after the vote, "Polls closed at 5 and we knew by about 6 it was rejected."

In response, 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."

The company has already shuttled workers from its other mills such as in Lanett, Alabama to keep the Cottonton mill running.

On January 26, it ramped up its efforts to break the Mahrt Mill workers' resistance by holding a job fair in Phenix City, Alabama, 26 miles north of Cottonton.

WestRock Human Resources Manager Ann Girtman told WRBL that the purpose of the job fair was to

"make sure that we staff our mill," adding that the company is "trying to make sure we build our pool up of applicants, as well as bring some through our temp agencies to fill our job openings."

As of this writing, neither the presidents of the three USW locals, the USW's main website and social media pages, nor the USW Paperworkers Facebook page have issued a statement on WestRock's most recent actions. Dozens of workers at Mahrt Mill have either retired or resigned from their positions since the lockout began, while the USW has not lifted a finger to defend the workers.

Meanwhile, WestRock, a Fortune 500 transnational packaging corporation with locations on five continents, reported an increase of net sales, net income, and net cash from operating activities last year. The corporation simultaneously boosted its share buybacks and dividend payments to its shareholders.

In response to the third contract rejection, Bobby Watson, president of Local 971, stated, "We want to get back to [work], the company wants to get back to that. At the end of the day, right, they want to make a profit. That's what corporations do, and employees want to be able to share in the profit, so everyone prospers in the end."

The ongoing lockout at Mahrt Mill has unfolded in parallel with other isolated USW paper mill workers' struggles throughout the country.

Over 100 USW Local 27 members at the Woodland Pulp mill in Baileyville, Maine voted in early December by a 92 percent margin to strike later that month, demanding increased wages and a cost-of-living adjustment as a hedge against inflation.

On January 5, one day after the third contract

rejection at Mahrt Mill, the Maine AFL-CIO reported that Local 27 members “voted overwhelmingly on December 19th and 20th to ratify a new three-year contract that includes higher-than-average wage increases, more vacation time and a signing bonus.” It claimed that the workers will “receive wage increases of 4 percent the first year, 3 percent the second year and 3 percent on the third year of the contract,” for a cumulative total of 10 percent. This would amount to an almost 10 percent real wage cut given the current 6.5 percent inflation rate.

Woodland Pulp is 150 miles east of the Sappi paper mill in Skowhegan, Maine, where USW Local 9 has just under 500 members. While settling for a “fair” wage-cutting contract in Baileyville, the union isolated the struggle of Local 27 members from their brothers and sisters in Local 9 who work for the multinational Sappi, headquartered in South Africa.

The first and second contract rejections at Mahrt Mill overlapped with two contract rejections by 850 USW Local 507 members at the Evergreen Packaging paper mill in Canton, North Carolina—the first in October and the second on November 30. Local 507 President Troy Dills summed up the union’s strategy by saying that “There’s a procedure, I don’t want to get into that in detail obviously, but we try to avoid a strike. That’s the intention.”

The Canton mill has received multiple violations from the North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality in the past year in response to reports by local residents that particulate matter such as lime dust emitted from the plant was falling in the surrounding neighborhoods “like snow.” Other environmental violations include “the release of 20 gallons [of] wastewater containing turpentine, a tall oil soap leak that killed at least 25 fish, a black liquor seep into the Pigeon River and violating the daily maximum limit for fecal coliform discharge,” according to *Smoky Mountain News*.

Two contract workers employed through Rimcor were killed at the plant in September 2020 after “a fire erupted in a confined space when a heat gun fell into a bucket of flammable epoxy vinyl ester resin...while maintenance and repair activities were ongoing throughout the facility,” according to *The Chemical Engineer*. The report states that the US Chemical Safety Board “identified the use of combustible

materials in the construction of the upflow tower” where workers contracted through Blastco were working and in the “crossover line” connected to the adjacent downflow tower where the Rimcor contractors were working, “which contributed to the quick spread of smoke and flames to the downflow tower.”

Instead of mobilizing its 850,000 members throughout the US and Canada in a concerted and unified struggle against the companies’ demands for lower wages, the imposition of higher health care costs on the backs of its members, and unsafe working conditions, the USW, like the rest of the AFL-CIO apparatus, time and again seeks to isolate and suppress every individual struggle of its members.

Working directly with the Biden White House, USW President Tom Conway oversaw the ten month-long lockout and isolation of oil workers at ExxonMobil’s Beaumont, Texas refinery and processing plant from May 2021 to February 2022, while guaranteeing both the Democrats and Republicans that there would be no nationwide strike of the USW’s 30,000 refinery workers. Conway boasted that the sellout contract imposed on the latter did not “add to inflationary pressures.”

To win their fight, Mahrt Mill workers must break the isolation imposed on them by the USW, wrest their struggle out of the hands of the union bureaucrats, form their own independent rank-and-file strike committee, and make the broadest appeal to their brothers and sisters at other paper mill factories and to workers in other industries throughout the country and internationally.

We encourage WestRock workers to contact us for more information about forming a rank-and-file committee at your workplace.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact