

After fourth round of voting, Steelworkers union forces sellout of locked-out WestRock paper mill workers in Alabama

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Less than one week after WestRock escalated its efforts to break the locked-out Mahrt Mill workers' resistance, the three United Steelworkers (USW) locals at the Cottonton, Alabama mill announced the passage of a contract to end the lockout following a fourth round of contract voting. The turnout of the vote, as well as the vote tallies, have not been released as of this writing.

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.

While the lockout began with 480 workers, dozens of workers have since either retired or resigned from their positions, with only an estimated 340 returning to work this month, according to Local 971 president Bobby Watson.

Determined to continue their struggle, the workers rejected the company's "last, best, and final offer" a third time on January 4. Major issues in the contract dispute included 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.

Following the third contract rejection, WestRock held a job fair on January 26 to employ scab labor to keep its mill operating.

Making good on its word to defend its "record financial results" achieved in fiscal year 2022, WestRock Human Resources Manager Ann Girtman told local news station 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."

In an effort to stifle the membership's determined opposition to the company before it escaped its hands, the union, according to WestRock, "reached a new collective bargaining agreement" shortly after the job fair. The union then made the workers vote for the fourth time on a contract that offered them crumbs from the billion-dollar Fortune 500 transnational packaging corporation, to force a surrender.

According to WRBL, the new contract includes a \$1.50 hourly raise, a \$7,500 dollar one-time bonus and "an additional 1 percent into an employee's 401(k) account."

While neither the USW's main website nor the USW Paperworkers Facebook page has yet to make a statement on the outcome of this lockout, Watson gave the following statement to WRBL:

"Basically, every day that you work on Sunday, they give you time and a half because it's Sunday. So, the company's argument was that it was outdated language. The industry has done away with it. So, they wanted to do away with it at our facility. So, the argument was that was very important to our families and our communities. And we did not want to give that up. This deal basically keeps us whole for that Sunday premium even though that language will no longer be in our contract. The economic package basically is WestRock keeping their commitment to our families and our communities and their workers that they will retain that benefit even though it's no longer written in our contract."

The company expressed satisfaction at the passage of the deal, stating that "WestRock appreciates the

diligence of the local USW unions to ratify the agreement. We look forward to our team members safely returning to the mill to resume their employment soon.”

The company’s response is not far removed from Watson’s response to the third contract rejection, after which he said, “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.”

As the *World Socialist Web Site* previously wrote: “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.”

In the case of its role in bringing the Mahrt Mill lockout to an end, this undoubtedly took the form of WestRock communicating to the local bureaucrats the financial damage the lockout was causing.

According to its “Fiscal 2023 First Quarter Results,” WestRock’s corrugated packaging sales increased 0.7 percent to \$2.2 billion and its consumer packaging sales increased 6.7 percent to \$1.2 billion. In addition, CEO David Sewell stated that the company expanded its “global footprint” into Mexico by acquiring the cardboard and paper packaging company Grupo Gondi.

At the same time, due to the “challenging environment” of the deepening world capitalist crisis, WestRock’s net sales decreased 0.6 percent to \$4.9 billion, with its net income plummeting 75.2 percent to \$45.3 million. The report made sure to point out the bill for the Mahrt mill work stoppage, which came to \$31.4 million, or over a quarter of a million dollars per each of the 117 days of the lockout.

The lockout was becoming too large of a financial burden in the company’s side. For this reason, the company sought to intensify its offensive against the locked-out workers, but WestRock was not willing to shutter another mill, as in Panama City, Florida and St. Paul, Minnesota last April and October, which the USW did nothing to stop.

The fundamental lesson of this lockout is the need for

rank-and-file workers to take control of the struggle out of the hands of the union bureaucracy. In spite of their courageous defiance of repeated sellout attempts, workers could not take their struggle forward as long as the fight was dominated by the pro-corporate apparatus.

This is only the latest such strike which the USW has betrayed. From May of 2021 to February of 2022, it isolated a ten-month-long lockout of oil workers at ExxonMobil’s Beaumont, Texas refinery and processing plant. It shut down the strike as it rammed through a national contract, with the assistance and support of the Biden administration. A contract which USW president Tom Conway bragged did not “contribute to inflation.”--i.e., restricted wage increases to below the rising cost of living.

WestRock workers must draw the lessons of this experience, as well as from the initiative taken by railroaders, graduate students, teachers, autoworkers and other sections of the working class by forming a rank-and-file committee, creating alternative structures to enforce democratic control by workers themselves.



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