

Chemical workers strike in Hopewell, Virginia

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Work at AdvanSix? Tell us what you think about working conditions and what you're fighting for in your strike by filling out the form below. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

At least 340 workers at AdvanSix in Hopewell, Virginia went on strike last Thursday after their contract expired on April 6. Members of International Chemical Workers Union Local 591C, United Association Local 851, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 666 and International Association of Machinists Local 10 have been negotiating with AdvanSix, formerly known as Allied Chemical, Allied-Signal and Honeywell, beginning March 27.

The 340 workers picketing in Hopewell, VA are part of a global upsurge of the working class, which includes mass strikes and protests in France, Sri Lanka, Greece, and the United Kingdom. The United States is also witnessing a wave of strikes by teachers and university workers who are demanding better wages and working conditions, and industrial workers are also pressing for strike action.

The Hopewell South bargaining unit, which is composed of chemical, food and commercial, machine-operation, electrical and plumbing workers, is demanding wage increases commensurate with successive years of record profits for AdvanSix. Additionally, workers are demanding reasonable hours. Currently, consecutive 18-hour shifts are a common occurrence at the nylon-resin manufacturer.

AdvanSix proposed a new agreement which offers “a market-based, role-specific wage approach to ensure we are providing competitive wages to our valued employees while ensuring long-term, sustainable growth,” Erin Kane, president and CEO of AdvanSix stated in a statement released on Friday.

The “role-specific wage approach” the company is proposing translates to half of the workers of the

Hopewell South bargaining unit receiving a 6 percent raise while the other will receive only a 3 percent increase beginning in year two of the contract. This drives a wedge between members of the multifaceted bargaining unit. A report from the unions on Wednesday’s negotiations with the company have revealed little on the specifics of the talks.

According to the unions, AdvanSix refused to extend the current labor agreement throughout the contract negotiations. Striking workers were notified over the Easter holiday that their health insurance was cut off.

A worker speaking to a local television station said, “I’ve been paying for health insurance with this company every week. It comes out of my paycheck. I expect health insurance. Now it’s pulled right out from underneath my feet.” One mother posted on Facebook that she was “struggling with rescheduling appointments & figuring out how to extend my oldest [prescription].” Another family member of a worker posted: “We as human beings should never knowingly put others, especially our children, at risk or be used as pawns for collateral damage.”

Since 1928, Hopewell, VA has been the site of the various iterations of what is now called AdvanSix. AdvanSix is a nylon and chemical manufacturer that produces caprolactam, a material used in carpet fibers, films and plastics, and fertilizer. It is one of the largest producers of ammonium sulfate, an ingredient for fertilizer, in the world.

Determined to maintain production throughout the strike, management has replaced striking workers with salaried and contingent contract employees. In a Facebook post, a striking worker expressed concern about the recklessness of the decision: “AdvanSix has now turned over operation and maintenance of the plant to salary personnel. It’s alarming to all of us that AdvanSix has chosen to place individuals with less training, less

knowledge, and much less experience in highly dangerous positions.”

This worker’s alarm is justified. On the day the strike was announced, Hopewell’s city manager announced they are beginning an investigation into environmental violations which were disclosed in a recent report by the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*. In her letter, Interim City Manager Dr. Concetta Maker stated, “Our citizens deserve and demand a city that is safe and free from pollution. Towards that end, we will be reaching out the [sic] Commonwealth [of Virginia] to develop a plan of remediation that addresses AdvanSix air quality and water quality violations that they have received over the past three (3) years.”

According to the documents reviewed by the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, AdvanSix was cited 66 times since 2015 for violations of the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts. Records show that the company has violated the Clean Air Act every month for the last two years. Only a year ago, AdvanSix released 7.23 tons of highly toxic sulfuric acid into the air. The chemical had leaked from equipment that inspectors had warned about the year before.

The Virginia Department of Environmental Quality stated that AdvanSix has demonstrated “a pattern of noncompliance” since 1990. Records show that the company has dumped sulfur dioxide, phenol, benzene, and nitrous oxide into the air at alarming levels and regularity during that time. Additionally, chemical runoff from the plant has created dead-zones in the James River and Hopewell watersheds. Dead-zones are areas where no life can exist due to lack of oxygenated water. AdvanSix has a permit allowing it to legally dump over one million pounds of nitrogen into the James River each year, more than any other plant in Virginia.

While union representatives and the media have focused on worker demands for pay raises to reflect the cost of living and to combat high inflation, based on AdvanSix’s environmental record, improvement of working conditions and worker safety must be a top priority.

A series of industrial disasters since February have exposed the brutal indifference of the ruling elite and the negligence of plant management towards workers and their communities. The residents of East Palestine, Ohio were exposed to toxins in the air and in their drinking water after the chemical spill caused by a train derailment on February 3 was set on fire in an effort to quickly resume operations.

Last month, a chemical plant near Philadelphia spilled roughly 8,100 gallons of a water-soluble acrylic polymer

solution into a tributary of the Delaware River. The polymer contained methyl methacrylate, butyl acrylate and ethyl acrylate, which threatened drinking water for the city’s 1.6 million residents in addition to those living in surrounding areas.

The same day, seven workers were killed in an explosion at the R.M. Palmer Company in West Reading, Pennsylvania, after reports of a gas leak were ignored by management.

Only this Tuesday, a fire consumed a massive recycling facility in Richmond, Indiana, releasing untold amounts of toxins over the former industrial town. The plant was a known hazard and its owners had been cited for safety violations numerous times. Over 2,000 residents living within half a mile of the disaster evacuated while others were told to keep windows and doors closed and turn off ventilation systems.

The unions and capitalist politicians in the state are calling for a quick settlement as AdvanSix products are crucial to important areas of the global supply chain such as agriculture. Republican Governor Glenn Youngkin said Tuesday, “This is just a moment for them to recognize that not everybody is going to get what they want, but they need to come together and reach a deal.”

International Chemical Workers Union representative Tommy Humphries echoed the governor’s view that management and workers have similar interests when he said, “We feel like it’s a partnership between the two. If the company is successful, then the people should be successful.”

In reality, AdvanSix, like other corporations worldwide, has amassed record profits in the last three years while workers have risked life and limb through the COVID pandemic and unsafe working conditions as their real wages decline.

Both pro-corporate parties have bent to the demands of the ruling class that profits remain sacrosanct over human life, both in their response to the COVID pandemic, which has killed well over one million in the US, and the refusal of oversight agencies such as OSHA and the EPA to impose meaningful consequences for safety violations.



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