

Lessons from the betrayal of the AdvanSix strike

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Are you an AdvanSix worker? Fill out the form below to get information about a building rank-and-file committee in your workplace.

On May 9, striking chemical workers at AdvanSix Hopewell South plant in Virginia voted to accept a sellout contract by 194 to 94, after having earlier voted down three nearly identical proposals. Workers had been on strike since April 6 after the company denied the union's request for a contract extension.

The strikers demanded wage increases including indirect compensation such as stock options. They also asked for paid sick leave and an end to forced overtime, or "drafting," which has workers taking on successive 16 and 18 hour shifts. This type of brutal working schedule, whether in the auto industry, the railroad or other industries, is becoming increasingly common across the US as companies try to squeeze out every last cent of profit from their workforce.

AdvanSix summarily dismissed the workers' proposals, playing hardball instead, not budging an inch on any of the workers' demands and reacting against the strike by cutting off healthcare and widely advertising \$1,000 bonuses for strikebreakers.

AdvanSix aimed to divide the bargaining unit, comprised of operators and maintenance workers, in four separate unions, from the very beginning of the negotiations. The company's initial offer would have given 51 percent of the workers, mostly operators, a 6 percent raise while offering the remaining 49 percent, predominantly maintenance workers, nothing in the first year of the contract.

The company also attempted to break up the bargaining unit by negotiating with each union separately. Though workers prevented the action, the policies of the various union bureaucracies were enforced in their own jurisdictional divisions, with workers in some unions eligible for meager strike pay, while others such as

members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, received none.

After a third overwhelming "No" vote by the rank-and-file, AdvanSix declared they would begin shaving points off the 6 percent raise operators were promised in order to pay for the scabs who were keeping operations in the plant running. This final threat produced the outcome that the company had preordained at the beginning of negotiations.

Despite the determination of workers, their fight was crippled from the start by the deliberate sabotage of the union bureaucracies, which worked to undermine their struggle and weaken their initiative.

The brutality of AdvanSix's negotiation tactics was enabled by the actions of the unions. The strikers must ask why the bargaining team brought what was, for all intents and purposes, the same sellout contract to a vote four times.

A source familiar with the negotiations told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "The bargaining team was told they had to bring back the company's last, best, and final offer. That's the rule." This was not only a flagrant violation of the mandate given to the unions by the rank-and-file, but a sign that the bureaucracy saw as its role the enforcement of management's demands.

That the work stoppage took place at all was entirely due to the refusal of the company to accept an extension proposed by the unions. But what purpose, from the standpoint of workers, would an extension have served, when management had already made crystal clear that there was nothing left to talk about? The unions simply handed all power to the company.

Once the strike had begun, workers were kept out with minimal or no strike pay for a month, making them more vulnerable to the company's acts of economic terrorism. Each of the four unions representing the strikers control hundreds of millions in assets, drawn from workers' own

dues money, which could, and should, have been used to adequately provision workers for a drawn-out battle.

The only appropriate response to the attacks by the company would have been the expansion of the struggle by appealing for the broadest possible support from workers at the Hopewell North and Chester facilities, also in Virginia, which both have their own contracts expiring soon, as well as to chemical workers around the country and even the world.

Instead, the unions worked to isolate and divide workers in order to force through the contract the company intended from the beginning. The unions tried to divide workers even within the plant across jurisdictional lines, including through the use of different strike pay policies. AdvanSix took full advantage of this. Moreover, the fact that the contracts at different AdvanSix plants expire at different times is another means through which the unions try to divide workers.

AdvanSix's Hopewell facility is a key strategic plant for the capitalist economy, which means it is also key for the working class. It is the world's largest single-site producer of ammonium sulfate, used in fertilizer, which is used globally to grow commercial crops such as corn, wheat, coffee, sugar, cotton and rice. The world market for fertilizer has been thrown into chaos by the NATO-sponsored war with Russia in Ukraine, given that Russia is the world's largest supplier of fertilizer.

Based on the importance of AdvanSix on the global economy, the strikers could have launched a powerful appeal to chemical workers, not only in other AdvanSix plants, but chemical workers more broadly, particularly under conditions of a global strike movement which is underway.

The immediate obstacle confronting workers is the union bureaucracy, whether it is in one union or four. It is not only in bed with management, but also with the capitalist political system. The strike was also undoubtedly being carefully followed by the Biden administration, which was fully prepared to intervene against it if necessary, as it did against railroaders. Therefore, the strikers were in a fight not only against management and the pro-corporate union bureaucracy, but standing behind them both, the capitalist political system in the United States.

The unions were fulfilling the mandate of the Biden administration's "pro-labor policy," which is to use the unions to drive down real wages and working conditions while enforcing labor peace in order to sustain its imperialist war drive. They have been tasked with

controlling the mounting unrest of the working class that has been exacerbated by the COVID pandemic and the unpopular hostilities towards Russia and China.

The only way AdvanSix workers could have leveraged the objectively powerful position they held was to fight for rank-and-file control of the negotiations by taking the struggle out of the hands of the unions. Workers need organization, but they need organizations which they actually control. The negotiations should have been guided by the principle that the will of the membership takes absolute and unconditional priority over all other interests.

This is the conclusion workers are coming to all over the world.

Last year, railroaders formed a Rank-and File Committee which, despite workers belonging to several different craft unions, opposed the Presidential Emergency Board's proposed settlement.

In the United Kingdom, the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee has called for the rejection of the sell-out contract being foisted upon them by the Communication Workers Union.

United Auto Workers members are forming rank-and-file committees in their plants to protect their jobs, end the two-tier wage system, and reinstate pensions.

The way forward for workers is to break free from the straitjacket imposed on their struggles by the nationalist, pro-capitalist union apparatuses. This will not happen through various "movements" or rank-and-file caucuses that redirect workers' anger into the blind alley of reform of the union apparatus. Workers must form rank-and-file committees independent of the unions if they are to win meaningful improvements to their living conditions.

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