

950 lose jobs as Cleveland-Cliffs closes mill in Weirton, West Virginia

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Work at Weirton? We want to hear from you. Fill out the form below to tell us what you think about the closure and what should be done. All submissions will remain anonymous.

Cleveland-Cliffs is closing its tinplate works in Weirton, West Virginia, this month, putting 950 workers out of their jobs. This is the last mill still operating in what once was the vast Weirton Steel Works, located about 40 miles west of Pittsburgh.

The announcement is devastating news to the workers, their families and the surrounding community, which has already seen the long decline of steel production in the West Virginia panhandle and along both banks of the Ohio River.

In making the announcement, Cleveland-Cliffs placed blame on the US International Trade Commission (ITC) for failing to impose tariffs on tin products imported from Canada, Germany, China and South Korea.

In a press release Cleveland-Cliffs stated: “The need to idle the Weirton plant is a direct result of the unanimous decision issued by all four members of the International Trade Commission (ITC) negating the implementation of anti-dumping and countervailing duties on tin mill products calculated by the Department of Commerce.”

Both Cleveland-Cliffs and the United Steelworkers filed an anti-dumping complaint last year charging that tinplate products were illegally being dumped into the US market. In January, the Commerce Department announced import duties against Canada, China, Germany and South Korea.

In particular the complaint was targeted against China, which they claim is overproducing tin products and selling them below cost to drive competition out of the market.

The reality is that those responsible for the closure are not overseas but in the United States. The company is closing the facility in order to maximize profits. US corporations have cut hundreds of thousands of jobs over the past year and a half, intending to use mass unemployment as a weapon against rising opposition from the working class.

The ITC complaint amounted to a demand by the company that its own corporate-controlled government in Washington protect its bottom line from foreign competition. When this did not arrive, the company retaliated by throwing hundreds of workers out on the street.

In 2023, the global tin market was valued at \$6.9 billion, and world output was 406.8 kilotons. The market is projected to grow to over \$9.2 billion by 2031. Primarily, tin is used to coat steel for

the production of cans and other products. It is also used in solder for piping and is a major component in optoelectronics, used for high-speed communications.

The ITC complaint filed by the United Steelworkers and Cleveland-Cliffs came amid a series of escalating trade war measures by the US against China. Last week, Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellen demanded that China cut back its production of electric cars and solar panels, on the grounds that they are “undercutting” American producers. US capitalism is embroiled in a bitter conflict with what it sees as its main rival for dominance of global markets and supply chains.

This is not limited to official enemies but also countries which, for the moment, remain American allies against China. The purchase of US Steel by Japanese-based Nippon Steel for \$14.9 billion has prompted a furious backlash, with politicians from parties demanding government action to torpedo the merger.

The bureaucracy of the United Steelworkers, as with the trade unions as a whole, is drawing together with the management of “native” companies on the false claim that trade war will save American jobs. It has instead backed Cleveland-Cliffs’ proposal to buy US Steel on entirely nationalist, “America First” grounds. This has two aims: first, to cover for its own role in enforcing job cuts and pro-company contracts over decades, and second, to try to dragoon workers into supporting new wars against China and others.

Lourenco Goncalves, Cleveland-Cliffs’ Brazilian chairman, president and chief executive officer, stated, “We worked very closely with our partners at the USW on this solution to save Weirton, and together fought tirelessly for its survival. ... We have been upfront and open with union leadership throughout this process and our partnership with the USW remains unbreakable.”

Just last year, the union pushed through a massive concessions contract with Cleveland-Cliffs. At the time, the now-deceased USW President Tom Conway boasted that the contract would save the Weirton tin plant by allowing the company to make \$100 million in capital improvements.

The year prior, the USW rammed through a national contract for oil refinery workers which it boasted “does not lead to inflationary pressures”—that is, keeps wages below price increases. That contract was the product of extensive collaboration between the White House and the USW.

In meeting with workers earlier this month, United Steelworkers International President Dave McCall offered no plan to mobilize

workers to fight the shutdown, instead telling workers that the plant can only be saved through appealing the ITC decision.

But the International Trade Commission (ITC) rejected the company's claim, declaring it did not find that there was significant damage to the American steel industry and that it was dropping its investigation.

Politicians both Democrat and Republican have lined up joining with Cleveland-Cliffs and the USW in denouncing the ITC decision.

West Virginia Senator Joe Manchin, a right-wing Democrat who frequently sides with Republicans against his own party, said: "Today's announcement is a consequence of the International Trade Commission's decision to turn a blind eye to nearly 1,000 hard-working employees right here in West Virginia in favor of illegally dumped and subsidized imports. Cleveland-Cliffs' closure is an absolute injustice not only to American workers, but to the very principle of fair competition, and it will undoubtedly weaken our economic and national security."

Both US senators from Ohio, Sherrod Brown (Democrat) and the ultra-right Trump supporter JD Vance (Republican) issued similar statements.

The Biden administration has not issued a statement, but protectionist policies are already becoming an issue in the upcoming presidential campaign. Biden has issued a statement opposing the Japanese-owned Nippon Steel plan to purchase Pittsburgh-headquartered US Steel, citing "national security" concerns. That is, the US needs access to domestic production in order to produce tanks, bombers and other equipment for US-backed wars in Gaza, Ukraine and around the world.

Decades of job cuts

The closure of the tinplate mill will mark the end of more than a century of steel production in Weirton, West Virginia.

Weirton Steel Corporation was formed in 1909 by Ernest Weir, as an integrated steel producer. In 1929, the company merged with two other steel companies, one in Detroit and the other in Cleveland, to form the National Steel Corporation. At its height, more than 13,000 people worked at the mills in Weirton, West Virginia.

However, by the 1970s, with the end of the postwar economic boom and the beginning of the decline of US economic dominance, American manufacturers carried out a massive program of reorganization to cut costs and boost production. Scores of steel mills were closed, and hundreds of thousands of workers were laid off.

During the 1980 and 1990s as the US steel industry was being reorganized and consolidated, the USW worked with the companies to cut hundreds of thousands of jobs, dismantling plant after plant, uprooting workers and their families and destroying communities.

Throughout this deindustrialization of Buffalo, Pittsburgh, Baltimore, Cleveland, Youngstown to Gary, Indiana, and Chicago,

the USW worked tirelessly to prevent steelworkers from drawing the conclusions that it was necessary to unite with workers across national borders to fight the massive multinational corporations.

Instead, the union tried to turn steelworkers against their class brothers and sisters by placing the blame for the layoffs and unemployment onto the backs of their class brothers from Japan, South Korea and Brazil. This set up a global race to the bottom, enabling these companies to whipsaw workers from different countries as they moved production around the world.

In 1984, National Steel sold the Weirton mill to the employees in what became at the time one of the largest Employee Stock Ownership Programs (ESOP) in the country. Many organizations claiming to be socialists hailed employee ownership as the answer to mill closures. They saw this as an alternative to uniting workers internationally in the struggle against the capitalist system.

In reality, "employee ownership" was just another means through which the Wall Street bankers could force through further concessions, this time being done by the "employee managers." The ESOP program meant that workers had to take a 20 percent pay cut, while saving National Steel \$500 to \$700 million in shutdown costs.

At that time, the mill employed over 7,000 workers. After the first initial few years, the company cut jobs, citing the need to make a profit. By 2004, the mill employed fewer than half that number.

In 2004, after several rounds of concessions and layoffs, Weirton was sold off in bankruptcy court and bought by the International Steel Group but sold two years later to Mittal Steel, which merged with Arcelor to become ArcelorMittal, the world's largest steel producer in 2006.

In 2020, ArcelorMittal sold its US business, including the Weirton plant, to Cleveland-Cliffs for approximately \$1.4 billion.

The nationalism and chauvinism being advanced by the United Steelworkers today has an even more sinister content than what was done in the 1980s and 1990s. The aim today is to prepare the working class for war.

The shutdown of Weirton can and must be stopped. This requires that workers unite with steelworkers and other workers around the world facing mass layoffs, not unite with management against "foreign" workers. To accomplish this, workers should form a rank-and-file committee at the Weirton works to fight against management, the USW's collusion and the corporate-controlled political setup.

Autoworkers, educators, healthcare workers and others have already formed such committees and are working to coordinate their struggles across the country and internationally through a world movement, the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).



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