

ATI steelworkers reject USW-backed sellout agreement

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Are you a steelworker at ATI or another company? Fill out the form at the end of this article to join the fight to build rank-and-file committees.

In a sign of growing opposition in the working class to eroding living standards, 1,000 steelworkers at ATI specialty steel mills in Pennsylvania and western New York defeated a proposal for a new six-year labor agreement recommended by the United Steelworkers last week. Neither the USW nor the company have released the vote totals or even the terms of the contract that was rejected.

After the rebuke by the rank and file, USW officials immediately agreed to a contract extension until April 30 in order to block any strike action by workers. In a sign that USW negotiators intend to push through essentially the same contract, no negotiations with the company have been scheduled until next month.

On February 28, just hours before the expiration of the previous contract, USW officials announced a tentative contract and ordered workers to continue working.

ATI workers have repeatedly demonstrated their determination to fight both the corporation and its hirelings in the USW bureaucracy. In 2015-16, ATI locked out the workers for seven months. In 2021, workers went on strike for three months. In both of those struggles, however, the USW bureaucracy was able to wear down the resistance of workers and pushed through massive concessions, including cuts to health care, eliminating pensions for new hires and agreeing to the destruction of nearly 1,200 jobs.

ATI operates several mills in southwestern Pennsylvania and one in Lockport, New York. Workers who spoke to *World Socialist Web Site* reporters said the proposed contract would do nothing to restore benefits or improve wages after years of concessions.

A worker at the ATI flagship plant in Breckenridge, Pennsylvania, who has worked for the company for nearly 10 years, said he voted against the proposal because it did not include a company-paid pension.

“The USW gave up the pension for the new hires. We don’t get a pension, just the 401K, which you have to put into. This is very hard work. The heat is intense and the fumes are dangerous. When people retire their health is not always that good.”

Referring to the death of a young steelworker, 20-year-old Daniel R. Vakulick, at a nearby mill not operated by ATI, he said, “These are dangerous jobs. Daniel was killed when there was an explosion at his mill. He was just 20 years old and had his whole life in front of him. The companies just care about money, not our

safety.”

“There were a few things I didn’t like,” explained a steelworker with nearly 20 years at the ATI Lockport mill. Chief among them was that the USW did not release the full contract to workers before the vote.

USW officials, he said, “cherry picked the information they gave us. If I’m voting on a contract I want to see the entire proposal. We have guys who worked on the contract for all this time, you would think they would want to show it off. Instead, we are asked to vote on something that we haven’t seen. Just take their word for it.”

The Lockport worker said the company was also cheating them out of incentive pay. Under the terms of the corporatist agreement signed by the USW, if production quotas are not met, workers lose money but they are not supposed to be charged if missed quotas are due to circumstances beyond their control.

Under our incentive program, we should have gotten \$7-\$8 an hour more. Instead, we just got two bucks. We are repeatedly screwed on incentive pay. Management is lying, they are charging us for everything, even things that are not our fault. One time there was a shipment of raw material that was contaminated with silver, which went into a melt before being noticed. The entire melt had to be scrapped. We got charged for that but that wasn’t our fault.

He added:

The raises have been miserable over the last 12 years. We’ve only gotten 9 percent. Every contract they tell us “times are hard everybody’s got to give some.” But we see concessions while the company is making millions. It sure feels like we are getting screwed and the union is just letting them walk on top of us.

The Trump administration

ATI, formally Allegheny Technologies, is a maker of specialty metals primarily for the aerospace and military industries. A strike would severely cripple the supply of the specialty metals needed in the making of jet engines, helicopter blades and medical supplies to name a few.

While extending the contracts in Pennsylvania and New York, the USW apparatus reportedly rammed through a new agreement for ATI Specialty Alloys and Components employees in Albany, Oregon, which runs through February 28, 2031.

Like the United Auto Workers, the Teamsters and other unions, the highly paid bureaucrats in the USW are opposed to any collective action by ATI workers because such a struggle could quickly develop in a broader battle by the working class against decades of union-backed concessions and job cuts. Above all, they want to prevent movement by workers that would disrupt the union apparatus's ever closer relations with the Trump administration.

While the USW apparatus urged Trump not to impose aluminum and steel tariffs on Canada—where the union still has 225,000 members—it is in a de facto alliance with the fascist president's economic war against the world, and above all, China.

In a frothing nationalist and militarist February 26 statement, USW President David McCall welcomed the opportunity to work with Trump's US trade representative to oppose "an array of policies promoted by the Chinese Communist Party that have undermined U.S. maritime, logistics and shipbuilding capabilities, resulting in tens of thousands of lost jobs across our shipbuilding supply chains and destabilizing our economic and national security interests."

The USW bureaucracy has also backed Trump's opposition to the Nippon Steel buyout of US Steel on supposed "national security" grounds, and its takeover by US-based Cleveland Cliffs.

Build Rank-and-File Committees

In a March 5 article, "Steelworkers union pushes sellout contract at ATI as leaders promote tariffs and trade war," the WWS, called for a rejection of the pro-company agreement and for rank-and-file workers to organize their fight in opposition to the USW sellouts. We stated:

Rank-and-file ATI workers must take the conduct of this struggle into their own hands by building a rank-and-file committee to organize the defeat of this sellout contract. Before any ratification vote workers must have the full contract and sufficient time to study and discuss it. The rank-and-file committee, made up of the most trusted and militant workers, must oversee the conduct of any vote and tabulation to ensure its integrity.

Decades of bitter experience has proven that the USW bureaucracy does not represent the interests of steelworkers at ATI or for that matter any of the other

steelmakers. The number of unionized workers in the steel industry has fallen by 72 percent since 1974, from 512,000 to 142,000, but the assets of the USW bureaucracy have risen to almost \$2 billion, according to the union's most recent filing with the US Labor Department.

The powerful rejection of this sellout agreement must be the start of a counteroffensive by the rank and file. Rank-and-file committees must be formed in all the ATI mills to establish lines of communication, outline a series of non-negotiable demands based on what workers need, not what management and the union bureaucrats say is affordable, and to prepare strike action to win those demands.

Workers cannot afford to sit back and hope that their vote will force the USW bureaucrats to fight for something better. Bitter experience, including the battles in 2015-16 and 2021—and the loss of more than half the membership at ATI—prove that is not the case. There is no doubt that the USW bureaucrats are already in close communication with ATI management on how to ram through another sellout deal.

Most importantly, workers need a new, internationalist strategy to fight. The battle over tariffs has nothing to do with protecting the livelihood of workers. Rather it is a battle to see which set of capitalists will control markets, access to raw materials and profits. The only outcome of this is world war, in which the sons and daughters of steelworkers and others will be sent to be killed and to kill the sons and daughters of workers from other countries.

A real fight in defense of jobs, living standards and to prevent war anywhere in the world requires the international unity of the working class on the basis of a common strategy. Only through global actions can the working class face off against ATI, US Steel, Cleveland Cliffs, Nippon Steel and their wealthy shareholders.

In opposition to job and wage cuts, workers must advance the demand for the transformation of the steel industry into a public utility under the democratic control and collective ownership of the working class.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) is fighting to unite workers of the world in opposition to the nationalist poison promoted by corporate politicians and union bureaucrats in every country.

To join the fight for rank-and-file power, fill out the form below.



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