Pattern bargaining opens for 23,000 US Steel and Cleveland-Cliffs workers

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Separate but closely linked pattern negotiations began this week for roughly 23,000 United Steelworkers (USW) members at US Steel and Cleveland-Cliffs. More than 2,000 Cleveland-Cliffs miners are negotiating separately. All three agreements expire September 1.

The steel agreements cover roughly 11,000 workers at US Steel and 12,000 at 13 Cleveland-Cliffs facilities. Together, these workers operate major mills, coke plants, finishing operations and iron ore facilities across the industrial Midwest and Pennsylvania.

No steel pattern has yet been established. Cleveland-Cliffs settled first in 2022, setting the wage benchmark later followed at US Steel. This year, US Steel was the first company to issue a detailed proposal.

The company is proposing annual wage increases that barely keep pace with inflation: 4 percent in the first year, 3 percent in each of the next three years and 4 percent in the fifth year, or 18.2 percent compounded by 2031. The offer includes a $4,000 ratification bonus and no changes to current pension plans or the profit-sharing formula, but it contains no cost-of-living adjustment to protect wages from inflation.

US Steel is also seeking what it calls “plan design changes” and “potential increased cost sharing” for healthcare. It proposes a joint union-management committee to identify cost savings whenever projected annual healthcare costs rise more than 3 percent, before “additional employee costs are considered.”

Steelworkers must enter this struggle with a warning: The USW bureaucracy is not preparing a fight based on what workers and their families need. It accepts management’s control over investment, staffing, plant closures and new technology and subordinates workers’ demands to what the companies claim is necessary to remain “competitive” on the global market.

Workers must take control of the struggle through rank-and-file committees independent of the USW apparatus. These committees should formulate demands, oversee negotiations, establish direct communication between plants and prepare coordinated strike action.

The warning from BP Whiting

Steelworkers need only look at the national oil bargaining earlier this year to see how the USW bureaucracy employs pattern bargaining. When contracts expired January 31, the USW kept 30,000 refinery and petrochemical workers at 26 companies on the job under rolling extensions while it bargained with Marathon Petroleum, the lead company.

On February 6, the USW approved a four-year national pattern providing raises of 4 percent in the first and fourth years and 3.5 percent in the second and third years, with a $2,500 signing bonus and no cost-of-living protection. The agreement blocked a nationwide strike while leaving unresolved forced overtime, understaffing and longstanding safety issues. Its purpose is to try to guarantee labor peace through 2030 as the oil companies profit from the expanding US war against Iran.

Pressing the companies’ advantage, BP immediately declared that it would not follow the pattern at its Whiting, Indiana refinery. Rather than mobilize all 30,000 NOBP workers to defeat this attack, the USW isolated the more than 800 Whiting workers, who were locked out on March 19.

Significantly, Whiting lies in the same northwest Indiana industrial corridor as Gary Works, Indiana Harbor and Burns Harbor.

Restructuring and deadly conditions

The corporations run the mills and mines as integrated production systems, but the union bureaucracies divide workers by company, plant, contract and jurisdiction. Several Cleveland-Cliffs facilities, including Dearborn, Butler and Zanesville, are represented by the United Auto Workers rather than the USW. Thousands more also work at the largely non-union Big River complex in Arkansas, where US Steel has concentrated much of its new flat-rolled investment.

Cliffs has idled or closed operations in recent years, while US Steel has expanded electric-arc production at Big River, which can produce millions of tons with far fewer workers than older integrated mills. Nippon Steel’s takeover of US Steel and its promised $11 billion investment program will accelerate the drive to reduce costs and increase output.

The companies’ cost-cutting drive has deadly consequences. On July 11, 62-year-old electrician Mitcheal N. Nelson was electrocuted while working on a malfunctioning transformer at Granite City Works during a storm. The official investigation is continuing.

Last year, an explosion at US Steel’s Clairton Coke Works near Pittsburgh killed Steven Menefee and Timothy Quinn and injured 11 others. The US Chemical Safety Board reported that workers were attempting to operate a gas-isolation valve manufactured in 1953 when gas monitors began alarming. The explosion occurred less than a minute after an evacuation call. Investigators later found the valve split by a circumferential crack, though the CSB, which the Trump administration has attempted to shut down, has not yet issued its final findings.

Workers told the *World Socialist Web Site* after the blast that a valve had been leaking for weeks and that management did not want to lose the production time needed to isolate and purge the line. The USW sent safety personnel to the site but has made no independent findings public. It did not mobilize workers to demand control over the investigation or the authority to shut down unsafe operations.

Tariffs protect profits, not jobs

The USW bureaucracy claims steelworkers share a common interest with the corporations in expanding the American steel industry. The record demonstrates the opposite. US mill shipments rose 4.9 percent in 2025 as finished steel imports fell 17.1 percent. Raw steel production in 2026 is running nearly 6 percent above last year. Increased output and tariffs have strengthened the producers' market position, but they have not restored the jobs destroyed through closures and automation.

The USW backed Trump's original Section 232 tariffs, demanded that Biden retain them and welcomed their expansion after Trump returned to office. It promotes steel and aluminum production as the foundation of "national security" and has called for expanded military procurement and the rebuilding of US shipbuilding capacity.

The policy is not new. For more than five decades, the USW bureaucracy has traded away jobs and working conditions in the name of preserving the "American" industry. It imposed labor peace through the 1973 Experimental Negotiating Agreement, then answered the devastating mill closures of the 1980s with concessions and "Buy American" campaigns. Workers accepted wage cuts, work-rule changes and higher productivity on promises that plants would be saved, only to see many close anyway.

The same nationalist outlook shaped the USW's vigorous 18-month campaign against Nippon Steel's $14.9 billion takeover of US Steel. From the deal's announcement in December 2023, the union appealed to Washington to block it on "national security" and trade grounds, praising Biden when he prohibited the acquisition in January 2025 and then pressing Trump to uphold the ban. Trump reversed Biden's decision in June, allowing the merger to proceed under a national security agreement that issued a so-called "golden share" to the US government.

During Trump's presidency, he or his designee exercises its veto rights; afterward they pass to designated federal monitoring agencies. The veto powers cover certain plant closures and idlings, reductions or delays in promised investment, moving US Steel's headquarters, and specified production, sourcing, pricing and trade decisions.

Far from guaranteeing jobs or placing production under workers' control, the arrangement subjects the company to direct state oversight in line with the strategic requirements of American capitalism and its preparations for trade war and military conflict.

This nationalist program binds workers to the corporations and the military preparations of US imperialism, above all against China. Workers are told to accept restructuring and speedup to make "American" steel competitive while the same industrial base is prepared for wars in which workers will be sent to kill and die.

Build rank-and-file committees

Rank-and-file committees at every US Steel and Cleveland-Cliffs operation should demand substantial wage increases with automatic cost-of-living protection; no increase in healthcare costs; equal pensions and retiree benefits; an end to forced overtime and understaffing; and full income protection during outages, idlings and technological change.

There must be no layoffs, closures, contracting out or transfer of work. Where new technology reduces the labor time needed to produce steel, the workweek must be shortened without loss of pay. The companies' books must be opened to inspection by workers.

The struggle cannot remain divided between US Steel and Cleveland-Cliffs or among USW, UAW and nonunion workers. Steelworkers at Gary Works, Indiana Harbor and Burns Harbor should establish direct communication with the locked-out BP workers and prepare joint action to break their isolation. A defeat at Whiting would embolden every corporation seeking to tear up the steel pattern, eliminate jobs and impose automation without workers' control.

American workers must appeal directly to steelworkers in Canada, Mexico, Japan, China, Europe and throughout the world. All confront transnational corporations, unsafe conditions, automation and the destruction of jobs.

The alternative to the nationalism of the USW bureaucracy is the international unity of the working class. The mills, mines, coke batteries and transportation networks built by generations of workers must be transformed into public utilities under democratic workers' control, with production organized according to social need rather than private profit.

The formation of rank-and-file committees, linked through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, is the necessary first step. Steelworkers must act before the USW apparatus presents another management-dictated agreement and declares that no alternative is possible.