

USW shuts down Bradken stoppage in Kansas, continuing isolation of ATI strikers

Jessica Goldstein
7 April 2021

United Steelworkers Local 6943 announced Monday that it reached an agreement with management at the Bradken electric arc steel mill in Atchison, Kansas, shutting down the two-week-long strike by about 60 hourly workers.

Workers produce locomotive rail and transit components and assemblies, mining, construction, industrial and military castings and general steel castings at the Atchison mill.

The USW billed the Bradken struggle as an “unfair labor practice strike” as it has with the ongoing Allegheny Technologies, Inc. (ATI) strike by over 1,300 workers across nine states. The union, meanwhile, raised no concrete demands over wages, health care benefits, safe working conditions, shorter working hours and other vital issues.

From the start, the USW insisted that the strike was for the purpose of convincing corporate management to bargain “in good faith.” During the first week of the strike in Atchison, Local 6943 President Gregg Welch told the *Atchison Globe* bluntly that “service bargaining and unfair labor practices are why we’re doing this. It’s not about protecting our seniority rights and keeping our senior people working.”

The unfair labor practice strike provided the cover needed by the USW to posture as a militant defender of workers’ rights, while raising no demands that would protect the day-to-day interests of the workers against attacks by management. However, it allowed the USW to continue its corporatist agenda of maintaining a seat at the table with the company in overseeing the exploitation of workers at the mill.

As Welch told MSCNews.net after the contract vote on Monday, “[We negotiated management rights] to where I really think the union can have a say in what goes on in the foundry, as far as the union seat at the table in negotiating policies and trainings and things like that.”

Bradken-Atchison Vice President of Operations Ken Bean, speaking to the same news outlet declared, “Obviously, we’re excited the strike is over...We’re very pleased we were able to work with the USW to make the needed changes to the contract to ensure the viability of Atchison & St. Joseph and position the sites for future success.”

Bean is the same corporate officer who was widely denounced by striking workers for issuing a letter encouraging workers to resign from the union in order to cross picket lines to scab during the strike under conditions where the USW had refused to issue strike pay despite sitting on over \$150 million in its strike fund. Now, Bean applauds the USW bargaining committee for being so accommodating to Bradken’s demands.

Although the strike at Bradken was small and limited by its official character as an unfair labor practice strike, the militancy of the workers at the mill and their support among the working class in the area are a part of a groundswell of working class opposition to the austerity policies of the ruling class worldwide. Under conditions of rising social discontent, even this small spark was enough to make the corporation and the USW bureaucracy very nervous.

The USW was determined not to allow the strike to expand out of its control and link up with the struggles of other sections of workers. The USW consciously blacked out information on negotiations from the press. It isolated workers from their brothers and sisters at ATI, whose strike coincided with the struggle at Bradken for nearly one week. Along with the United Mine Workers of America, it has isolated steelworkers from 1,100 striking mineworkers at Warrior Met Coal in Alabama.

When Bradken brought strikebreakers across the picket lines to continue production, the USW took no substantive measures to mobilize the working class to stop production, weakening the position of the workers. Neither did the USW mobilize any real fight against intimidation tactics employed by Bradken, such as working with the local government to hire local cops to intimidate workers around the plant and placing restraining orders limiting pickets on city sidewalks.

Since adopting the policy of corporatism in the 1980s, like other unions, the USW has worked openly as a partner with company managers in increasing the “competitiveness” and “economic viability” of the corporations under conditions of deepening economic crisis. At ArcelorMittal, US Steel, and other major corporations, it has set up join labor-

management committees in which it plays a role by offering to suppress the struggles of workers in return for cushy jobs and other perks.

Voting on the contract concluded Monday at the Atchison Event Center, but there is no indication of how many members voted for or against the contract, and under what conditions voting took place. Unlike the contract struggles of workers at US Steel and (former) ArcelorMittal USA in 2018, the USW did not even report any highlights of the contract in the press or on its social media pages or official web page.

During the strike workers contacted by the *World Socialist Web Site* stated that they were unaware of any concrete demands in the contract, but had only been told that management was trying to take away the union's collective bargaining rights. As one worker said, "They are basically changing all the management rights to eventually kill our union, seniority, and what I feel [are] basic human rights."

Workers have every right to organize a fight based on what they need, irrespective of what company management or their USW "partners" say they are willing to give. This requires the building of an independent rank-and-file committee democratically controlled by the workers themselves.

Any claims by management that there is no money are a patent lie. Bradken is a subsidiary of Hitachi Construction Machinery Co., which recorded \$2.27 billion in gross profit in 2020, a drop from \$2.68 billion in 2019, but still well above its 2017 gross profit of \$1.57 billion. Bradken is incorporated in the state of Delaware, a notorious tax haven. Bradken's other North American plant in Tacoma, Washington, is also very profitable, as the US Navy's leading supplier of high-yield steel for its submarines.

In spite of its efforts, the USW was unable to keep the struggles of the Bradken workers and ATI workers totally isolated. The WSWS was and continues to be the only organization fighting to link these struggles together and connect workers across workplaces and industries, as well as state and national boundaries, in a common struggle for their demands against the capitalist system.

At the ATI picket lines, a worker at the ATI Vandergrift plant near Pittsburgh told WSWS reporters that they were in solidarity with the Bradken workers, adding, "They have my full support."

The outcome of the Bradken strike is a warning to ATI workers. Important lessons have to be drawn from this struggle. In the first place, workers must recognize that the USW is not a workers' organization. It has not been for decades, and it cannot be transformed into one. It exists as an arm of corporate management, and the outcome of the Bradken struggle reveals this quite nakedly.

On the other hand, steelworkers have powerful allies in the international working class. The USW and other unions, as well as the Democratic and Republican parties, constantly pit workers against one another in different workplaces, industries and in different countries. Workers must reject the notion that other workers are their competitors and recognize that all are part of a common struggle against the same capitalist class enemy. To break from the isolation that the unions seek to impose, workers must elect rank-and-file committees to organize their struggles and decide democratically on a set of demands based on their needs, linking up with other workers in a powerful movement to fight for them.

Last, workers must reject the pro-capitalist program of the trade unions and their subordination to the big business Democratic and Republican parties. Only socialism can achieve equality for the working class, a system in which the workers themselves control production and distribution of the goods that they produce, to meet the needs of society and not the profit interests of a few.

This is a political struggle. As much as it requires that workers break with the unions and the two pro-corporate political parties, it also requires the vast productive forces of society to be reorganized on a high principle: socialism, production for human need, not profit, under the democratic control of the working class.

To organize a rank-and-file committee at your workplace, contact workers@wsws.org today.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact