

... ATI Albany steelworkers: Locked out but standing proud

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ident Tom Conway, the union's lead negotiator in talks with ATI, says the company justified its demand for concessions by pointing to the downturn in steel: Prices globally are in a sustained slump in large part because of a surge of exports from China, which is accused in several pending trade complaints of selling steel below the cost to produce it. But Conway says ATI's proposal — slashing worker benefits — is a permanent solution to that temporary problem.

"It's undeniable there's some pressure, but the company has decided they're going to use this as an opportunity to try and strip things out of the labor agreement that have been there for generations and that have nothing to do with the crisis," Conway told the Labor Press by phone.

Not everyone at ATI is being asked to make sacrifices. Last year ATI gave CEO Rich Harshman a 70 percent raise, to nearly \$8 million, and paid its stockholders a 72-cent dividend.

"That's a heck of a racket when you can run your business at a loss and give yourself a big bonus," says picketer Karl Krupicka, 52. A 27-year employee, he came prepared for the

weather in full rain gear and a miners light.

When I ask picketers about the scabs, and the executives who hired them, I hear surprisingly little profanity — just disappointment, and a sense of betrayal.

"I don't ever remember a more disgusting day than the first day they first paraded all those vans in front of us," says Jim Wright, Local 7150 vice president and a 37-year employee at the plant. Wright said the lockout took him by surprise. He thought the company was bluffing.

Under the canopy, the picketers reminisce about the days when their plant was a stand-alone company called Oremet (Oregon Metallurgical Corporation), and CEO Carlos Aguirre would visit the shop floor to talk to workers. Back then they earned company stock with every paycheck. ATI bought Oremet in 1997 for \$560 million. Now it's playing a game of hardball, attempting to starve them into accepting far-reaching concessions.

The two sides have met just once since the lockout began — a Sept. 11 session with a federal mediator; USW says ATI refused to discuss anything but its last offer.

Locked out workers in Ore-



DRY SOCKS: THE FIRST REQUIREMENT OF ANY CAMPAIGN Karl Krupicka and Joe Barton use a camp stove to get dry after several hours of picket duty in a winter rain storm.

gon are eligible for unemployment insurance at least through February, and picketers say they're determined to hold out.

"You either sacrifice the present, or you sacrifice your entire future," says millwright Scott Youngberg.

Some, however, won't be going back. Conway says nationally as many as 200 workers who were eligible for retirement decided in the weeks leading up to the contract expiration that it was time to retire. And others —

particularly millwrights and electricians who possess relatively transferable skills — have found jobs elsewhere since the lockout.

Several hours after I arrive, the sun comes up and the rain breaks, and the picketers re-

establish their line of signs along the road, garnering regular honks from passing trucks and cars.

"When we get all through with this," says Wright. "We're going to be a tougher union."



Checks made out to USW 7150 can be sent to the union hall at 1400 Salem Ave., Albany, 97321, with a note indicating the contribution is to support the locked-out workers.

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— Jim Wright, 37-year employee at the plant



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