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***STEELWORKERS UNION SETS NATIONWIDE
ARCELOR/MITTAL STRIKE VOTE FOR TODAY***

By KEVIN NEVERS

At 4 p.m. today at the Duneland Falls banquet center Local 6787 of the United Steelworkers (USW) will join 15 other locals across the country to vote on the union leaders' request for authorization to strike ArcelorMittal.

The membership of Local 6787 totals 3,452—more than half of whom reside in Porter County—while that of all 16 locals serving ArcelorMittal's U.S. facilities totals approximately 16,000.

Local 6787 President Paul Gipson was hopeful this morning that all members not on duty at the Burns Harbor facility will attend the vote. Members scheduled to work, on the other hand, were being contacted by delegates who would carry their vote to the meeting.

Meanwhile, Gipson said, Local 6787 is mobilizing for a strike. Strike captains are being appointed and instructed, churches and other community service organizations are being contacted, the local's own \$350,000 food pantry at Duneland Falls is being inventoried, and preparations are being made, in accordance with the Strike Defense guidelines of the USW International, to provide financial assistance to the membership. "We'll be talking to banks," Gipson told the Chesterton Tribune, "the institutions that hold mortgages. We'll be talking to utilities. We'll be telling them that we don't expect to see any foreclosures."

In addition, Gipson said, Local 6787 is liaising with other unions with business at the Burns Harbor facility, like the Teamsters and Building Trades, while he himself is scheduled to meet with Burns Harbor Town Marshal Jerry Price and the Porter County Sheriff's Police about the picket line itself. "Members are law-abiding citizens," he said. "Sometimes some people get out of line. We don't condone that. That's not our way. That's not how we do it, not since I've been president. We need to do what works. We're looking to the community at large for support. We've always supported the community, through United Way and other outreaches, and now we're relying on the community to support us.

Nevertheless, Gipson noted, "In some ways a strike is going to war and when you go to war there are going to be injuries."

Gipson did express doubt whether management could run the Burns Harbor facility by itself, which in its heyday took fully 6,200 members—now down to the 3,452—to operate. He expressed no doubt at all that ArcelorMittal would hire scabs if a strike is declared, in what Gipson

would consider a hazardous move. “Scabs can’t run the plant,” he said. “Not safely, not safely at all. Inexperienced people running a plant in need of capital improvements would be extremely dangerous. We’ve got some highly skilled members, people who are experienced and talented and know their way around that plant, and some of them have died there.”

“Maybe,” Gipson speculated, “ArcelorMittal doesn’t want to reach an agreement. Maybe it’s not about money. Maybe Lakshmi Mittal wants to run the plant like he does in the other countries without human rights and unions. I hate to say it, even think it, but maybe it’s a race to the bottom.”

The Case for Strike

There are several major issues on which the USW and ArcelorMittal have been unable to reach agreement, Gipson said. But really there is only one issue on which the union is making its stand. “The labor cost per hour needs to be the same between ArcelorMittal and U.S. Steel,” he said. After 13 weeks of unsuccessful negotiations, though, the USW leadership has concluded that the company is looking for a “competitive edge” at the expense of the membership.

ArcelorMittal is doing so chiefly in six ways, Gipson said, which fly in the face of the pattern set by the new four-year contract which the USW recently negotiated with U.S. Steel.

- Whereas the union prevailed on U.S. Steel to reduce retiree health-care premiums by 30 percent, ArcelorMittal is demanding a 39-percent increase in those premiums, Gipson said.

- The company is attempting to gut the current incentive program, Gipson said, actually to cut incentives by more than the wage increase sought by the union. “That’s huge. When you’re talking incentives, you’re talking about our biweekly paycheck.”

- At the same time that ArcelorMittal wants to slash incentives, Gipson said, it refuses to place its profit-sharing plan on equal—or roughly equal—footing to U.S. Steel’s. “Not everything in our contract with ArcelorMittal needs to be the same as it is in the contract with U.S. Steel, but when all the math is done the labor cost per hour does need to be the same,” he emphasized.

- ArcelorMittal is refusing to make the necessary capital investments in its U.S. facilities. “Mittal wants to go shopping” throughout the world for other plants, Gipson said, and eventually he’ll increase his annual capacity from 120 million tons to 250 million tons, but here in the States the company’s lack of commitment to capital investment threatens the integrity of its facilities. “That’s going to affect the community.”

- ArcelorMittal is not only refusing to adequately fund the VEBA Trust Fund—established to provide some measure of health-care benefits for

retirees who lost theirs when Bethlehem Steel Corporation went bankrupt—but to create with a \$25 million quarterly contribution a separate account in the VEBA to help offset the increase in the cost of health care for current and future retirees, Gipson said.

•Finally, ArcelorMittal is refusing to make the necessary contribution to increase the annual pension multiplier from its current \$85 to \$100, Gipson said. That multiplier has fallen as the fund's trustees have decreased the accrual rate in the wake of numerous retirements. Thus, before Bethlehem Steel went bankrupt, a member who worked 30 years could expect a monthly pension payment of approximately \$3,000, or 30 times \$100. Now a member can expect a monthly payment of only \$2,550, or 30 times \$85.

“We want to reach an agreement,” Gipson concluded. “This is not a case where a union is a bully and trying to push a company around. We’ve sacrificed for the industry and set productivity records and we’ve got to be rewarded accordingly.”

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