

Canada: No concessions strike against Vale Inco in jeopardy

Carl Bronski
6 May 2010

The 3,100 workers striking Vale Inco's sprawling nickel mining complex in Sudbury, Ontario and the 200 workers striking the company's Port Colborne facility are at a crossroads in their ten-month fight against the transnational mining conglomerate's concession demands.

The miners, smelter and mill workers, members of the United Steelworkers (USW), have stood shoulder to shoulder on the picket lines since July 13th. The strikers have faced extreme financial hardship, seen homes and cars repossessed, and braved daily harassment from security guards employed by AFI International, a professional strike-breaking outfit. They have endured draconian restrictions on picketing imposed by the courts and enforced by their own union leadership.

In Sudbury, they have witnessed an historically unprecedented scabbing operation mounted by the company and abetted by USW officials who have even acquiesced to the use of union members from another USW local (Local 2020) to help break the strike. And they have twice massively voted down derisory contract offers, the second time some eight months into the bitter dispute.

Yet even as the striking workers continue to stand firm, officials of the USW bureaucracy—in Sudbury, in Toronto and in Pittsburgh—are scheming to foist upon them a sell-out contract that will resemble in almost every detail the concessions contract they rejected by an 89 percent majority only eight weeks ago.

Over the past week, while strikers complained bitterly about being kept in the dark regarding rumours of secret negotiations with the company, USW officials insisted that no talks had been initiated. As late as this past Monday, Wayne Fraser, director of USW District 6 and the pre-eminent USW official in Canada insisted that reports of behind-the-scenes contract negotiations were “dead wrong.” But less than 24 hours later, the office of Ontario mediator Kevin Burkett confirmed to the *Sudbury Star* that talks under his auspices have been under way since April 26.

During this period, the rhetoric of the union officialdom has pointedly steered clear of any discussion of the two key demands of the strikers—maintaining the nickel bonus and the single tier pension program. (Indeed, the leadership has already agreed to a two-tier pension scheme in previous negotiations). Instead, comments from the bureaucrats and arguments by their lawyers at ongoing Ontario Labour Relations Board hearings have signaled their willingness to accept defeat in return for a face-saving back-to-work protocol.

USW lawyer Brian Shell made this abundantly clear at the labour board hearings currently underway. “We think,” said Shell, “the [company's] refusal to negotiate the reinstatement [of nine fired workers] is a position designed for rejection by the union. In other

words, it's a deliberate attempt to ensure the continuation of the strike...So we say [Vale's] position in February-March was designed for [contract] rejection. So they did it really well. And the position they have taken, such as the refusal to negotiate anything about the discharged people, is bad faith bargaining and is designed to ensure rejection.”

The legal submissions are clearly meant more for the ears of Vale management than the presiding jurist—a signal that if the company relents on the victimizations, or even some of them, the USW will proclaim “victory” and shut the strike down. The labour board hearings are scheduled to continue into July, with any decision to be handed down well after that.

Vale Inco management has been emboldened by the USW leadership's prostration before its steadily increasing scabbing operation. To enforce its will, Vale has been gradually ramping up production in Sudbury using hundreds of contractors and so-called replacement workers, managers, and 56 skilled members from USW Local 2020 which organizes 240 office, technical and professional workers at the complex.

In October, Vale used hundreds of managerial personnel and the non-striking Local 2020 workers to restart minimal mine and copper concentrate mill operations in Sudbury. In the face of this provocation, Dan Serre, the Local 2020 unit chair, told the *Sudbury Star* that his advice to his members was “Just do the work and do it safely.”

Then in January, smelter production was restarted. Alongside management and technical staff, Vale mobilized contractors and replacement workers, many of whom are permanently bivouacked inside the mining complex. The scabbing operation continues to be carried out in great secrecy, but hundreds of “replacement personnel” are now working at the complex. Last month, company spokesman Steve Ball made it clear that more scabs will soon be recruited with the aim of moving to full production by this summer.

In response to this unprecedented provocation (scabs have never before been deployed in an Inco labour dispute), the USW International and Local 6500 officialdom have staged publicity stunts at various international corporate venues, issued nationalist harangues, and organized the occasional demonstration.

No attempt has been made to systematically mobilize the working class in the Sudbury area (one of the cradles of industrial unionism in Canada), let alone in Ontario and across North America, in support of the strike. Rather the union bureaucracy has been preaching faith in the courts which have issued injunctions facilitating Vale Inco's strike-breaking campaign. Only eight strikers are allowed to walk any given picket line and they are allowed to delay vehicles entering the complex for only fifteen minutes.

The USW Local 6500 website orders workers to abide by these draconian restrictions. “We are obliged to follow the court’s orders. We must resist the powerful temptation to react with conduct contrary to the outstanding injunctions to the Company’s inflammatory conduct and to their intransigent bargaining position.”

In short, even as Vale Inco violates court orders with their strikebreaking goons, even as they violate local Sudbury by-laws with their bivouacked scabs, the strikers, insists the USW, must stand idly by. No wonder striking workers laughed in derision at USW International President Leo Gerard’s recent threat to “fill the jails” in a never to materialize campaign of “civil disobedience.”

The utter refusal of the USW bureaucracy to mobilize the union’s membership and resources behind the strike was exemplified by the recent Local 2020 contract negotiations. These negotiations culminated in the ratification of a new contract that legally compels the office, technical and professional workers to support Vale Inco’s scabbing operation. During bargaining, union officials refused to even make an issue of the use of their members as scab labor. Instead, they extolled the virtues of the company-proposed contract at the ratification meeting whilst withholding their benediction. Faced with this utter hypocrisy from their own leadership, Local 2020 workers voted to accept the deal. (See: Canada: Vale-Inco strike now longest in Sudbury Basin history)

Instead of mobilizing workers based on their own independent interests, Gerard and the Canadian and local Sudbury leaderships are urging workers to look for support from the big business federal and Ontario Liberal Party leaders, respectively Michael Ignatieff and Dalton McGuinty, and the social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP). They have implored these big business politicians to resurrect anti-scab legislation—legislation that has been recently rejected by Liberals in Ottawa and in the Ontario legislature and studiously side-stepped by NDP governments in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Nova Scotia over the past several years.

Backing the treachery of the union bureaucracy have been various union hangers-on within middle class “radical” circles, some of whom hold university posts and research sinecures funded by the unions. Thus, the social democrats of the “Socialist Project” hailed the USW bureaucracy in their recent May Day statement. “The Steelworkers”, they opine, “have engaged in one of the most creative struggles seen in Canada for a very long time.” They then cite the various junkets union officials have embarked upon to lobby stockholders in New York or meet with fellow bureaucrats and Brazilian government officials. “Sudbury even played host to an international conference on globalization”, they exult.

But if union officials have traveled to numerous international destinations, their perspective has remained entirely nationalist. Since the beginning of the current dispute at Vale Inco, Canadian USW District 6 leader Wayne Fraser, alongside the Local 6500 leadership in Sudbury and USW International chief Leo Gerard have invoked nationalist mantras at every turn, lambasting the acquiescence of the federal government in allowing a foreign-owned firm to purchase a company that had for over a century been headquartered in Canada. The bureaucrats in the trade unions along with their allies in the NDP promote the illusion that there are “good” home-grown capitalists, who, for the benefit of all Canadians, altruistically refuse to maximize their profits. This chimera is counter-posed to the “bad” foreign interlopers who will do their utmost to beggar the Canadian population.

Yet even a casual observer of the history of mining in Canada, let

alone of the Inco operation, will have no trouble recalling the relentless drive by Canadian owners to maximize their profits at the expense of the mining communities and the bitter strikes that followed—including the Great Inco Strike of 1978-1979 that shortly after its conclusion saw the permanent layoff of more than 20,000 mine workers. Moreover, the most powerful Canadian-based corporations are also multinational, like Vale, scouring the globe for the best possible return on their own investments at the expense of workers internationally.

The USW’s nationalist denunciations of Vale Inco are part of its ongoing promotion of economic nationalism. In the name of defending “Canadian” or “US jobs,” the USW calls for protectionist policies aimed at placing the burden of unemployment on workers in other countries, while imposing wage and jobs cuts on their own members in order to boost the corporate “competitiveness” of “our” companies.

The impasse in which the Vale Inco workers now find themselves is one common to workers all over the world. The nationally-based, pro-capitalist unions have proven utterly impotent in the face of globally-organized corporations that seek to pit worker against worker in a race to the bottom. The unions’ response to the intensification of class struggle over the past three decades has been to abandon even the most elementary precepts of working class solidarity and struggle and to integrate themselves ever more closely into management.

Since the eruption of the world financial crisis in September 2008, the unions have lurched even further to the right. Last year the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) bowed before pressure from Washington and the federal Conservative and Ontario Liberal governments and imposed massive job, wage and benefits cuts on workers at the Detroit Three. With the full support of the unions, including the USW, the NDP in December 2008 sought to forge a coalition government with the Liberals committed to implementing billions of dollars worth of corporate tax cuts and waging war in Afghanistan.

The Vale Inco workers’ militant anti-concessions strike is now at a crossroads. If the strike continues under the political and organizational leadership of the USW, it will be strangled and defeated.

Vale-Inco workers must strive to make their strike the spearhead of an industrial and political counter-offensive of the entire working class against the drive of big business and their governments to make working people pay for the world capitalist crisis through wage and job cuts and the dismantling of public and social services. They must take the leadership of the strike out of the hands of the bureaucracy, form their own rank-and-file strike committees, and consciously strive to unite their struggle with miners and other worker around the world.

Militant industrial action, including the organizing of mass picketing and solidarity strikes, must be coupled with the development of an independent political movement of the working class that fights for a workers’ government committed to reorganizing economic life on socialist lines so production and employment can be based human need, not the profits of the few.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact