

Steelworkers officials dismantle blockade at Vale Inco

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United Steelworkers (USW) union officials dispersed a burgeoning rank-and-file protest at entrances to Vale Inco's Clarabelle Mill and Coleman Mine in Sudbury, Ontario Wednesday—the day before the strike by 3,300 nickel miners and ancillary workers at Vale Inco's Sudbury and Port Colborne operations entered its eleventh month.

Last Friday striking workers placed railroad ties across entrance roads and brought in trailers in which to sleep after labour mediator Kevin Burkett announced that exploratory talks between the company and the union had broken down. The workers, supported by non-striking members of the community, vowed to maintain their blockade until a settlement was reached.

Although Vale Inco, which has mounted a scabbing operation since last October, stated that milling operations would not be affected by the blockade for at least a week, company lawyers made emergency appeals to Superior Court Justice Robbie Gordon to outlaw the workers' action. Gordon rushed to rule in the company's favour, issuing an order against the blockade Monday morning that cited the picket-line protocols that the union bureaucracy had agreed to under pressure from the courts earlier in the strike.

The USW officialdom was quick to respond to the court's decision. Local 6500 President John Fera, Vice-President Rick Bertrand and Chief Steward Pascal Boucher immediately visited the protest sites to tell workers that they could face legal consequences if they did not stop their action. Vale Inco has already summarily dismissed at least nine strikers during the dispute for not "acting within (Vale's) code of conduct".

When a sheriff read the court's order to the hundreds of protestors, they refused to move, chanting "Hell no, we won't go." The police, who have so far counted on the machinations of the union officials to prevent the strike from becoming a militant fightback against the company's scabbing operation, were clearly unprepared for resistance to their order to disperse and retired without further action.

Supporters of the blockade were adamant. A pilot at the Clarabelle entrance interviewed by the *Sudbury Star* said, "Our union is ruined. We're here to fight for other people...It's my right as a citizen to freely assemble and protest. I thought I lived in a free country." Lise Levesque, an organizer of the action at the Coleman Mine and the wife of a striking miner, told the *Star*, "I'm scared that we're going to end up just like you see on the news in Brazil or in those other countries. Or in Greece right now... Take

the shotguns, do whatever. I don't care. I really don't. You know West Virginia just lost 29 men. Is that what's going to happen here before anybody steps up to the plate?"

Monday night, workers buttressed their campsites with additional supplies.

On Tuesday, company lawyers complained to the court that the police had failed to dismantle the blockades. The outnumbered police, fully cognizant of the powder keg in the strike-bound city, pleaded with the court for more time to "develop" their "response to the situation." A frustrated Judge Gordon then intoned, "The police have not acted, to my knowledge, in a single incident. In the three days that the barricades have been up, the police have ignored them."

With the rank-and-file action growing in strength, the union leadership's overriding concern was to shut down the blockade lest it trigger a broader mobilization. Membership meetings were suddenly announced for Wednesday so as to provide the strikers with an update on last week's failed negotiations—negotiations that the union initially denied were even being held. (See: "Canada: No concessions strike against Vale Inco in jeopardy")

For several weeks, it has been an open secret in Sudbury that the union bureaucracy has capitulated before the company's concession demands and that the major sticking point in ending the dispute has become the back-to-work protocol. Vale management, intent on completely emasculating the union, is adamant that none of the nine fired strikers will be allowed to regain their jobs. The union officialdom, for its part, is arguing that in order to force through ratification and otherwise continue to be able to police the membership, the company needs to provide them with a face-saving agreement concerning the dismissed workers.

As the blockade grew in open defiance of the courts at the beginning of this week, USW lawyers stepped up pressure, including behind-the-scenes appeals, for the Ontario Labour Relations Board (OLRB) to expedite adjudication of a bad-faith bargaining complaint against the company concerning the nine fired strikers. The OLRB was not due to continue hearings on this and other bad-faith bargaining grievances filed by the USW against Vale Inco until the end of June, but by midweek the board relented so as to help the union in shutting down the blockade.

On Wednesday morning, Local USW 6500 President Fera and Canadian Steelworkers District 6 President Wayne Fraser attended the two blockades so as to announce that a Labour Board hearing on the fate of the nine has been scheduled for Friday. (What they

did not say is that the company has objected to separating the complaint concerning the nine from the rest of the bad-faith bargaining grievances and that Friday's OLRB hearing will begin with company lawyers filing a motion for the matter to be put off till the previously scheduled June 25 hearing.)

Many at the blockade were reluctant to end their action. But with it ever more clear that the union was lining up with the police, the courts and the company to suppress their initiative, the protestors took down the blockades. A striking smelter worker said, "It was very difficult this morning to hear our leaders tell us to leave." Alan Asher, a supporter from the community at the blockade, said, "I don't think this is the time now to end the blockade. We can recognize a bully when we see one and [Vale Inco] is acting like one."

This has not been the first time that the union bureaucracy has sought to channel the determined struggle of the striking workers into political and judicial dead ends. At the outset of the dispute, union officials lobbied the federal Conservative government of Stephen Harper to release information on the conditions that the government imposed on Vale when the Brazil-based company purchased Inco in 2006. The government refused, citing legally binding confidentiality provisions.

Next up was a series of international publicity stunts—lobbying stockholders in New York and bringing birthday cake to the company's headquarters in Brazil. Then the union fell back on appeals to the labour board, which in the face of the continuing scabbing operation undertaken by the company, have proven fruitless. Indeed, a New York metal market spokesman breathlessly announced this week that Vale Inco would resume refined nickel ingot shipments to U.S. markets next month. This he declared was "tangible evidence that Sudbury production is now making its way into the supply chain".

Recently the union has resurrected the demand that the big-business government of Ontario Liberal leader Dalton McGuinty adopt a provincial anti-scab law. Liberals in both the federal and Ontario parliaments, alongside Conservatives, have consistently voted down such proposals. For their own part, the New Democratic Party (NDP), which provides lip service to anti-scab proposals, has refused over the past decade to pass such legislation in any of the provinces where it has held power. On Wednesday, McGuinty was unequivocal in his rejection of the USW's entreaties, calling instead for negotiation and conciliation. In other words, the government continues to give Vale Inco carte blanche for its strikebreaking offensive.

According to press reports, at Wednesday's union membership meetings workers who had participated in the disbanded blockade action made angry statements blaming the hundreds, if not thousands, of union members who did not actively participate in the five-day protest for the strikers' current predicament. Their emotions, however heartfelt, were entirely misplaced. It has been the union leadership—the USW, the Ontario Federation of Labour and the Canadian Labour Congress—and their allies in the social-democratic NDP that have isolated and demobilized the strikers, slowly smothering their militant struggle under a barrage of worthless appeals to the capitalist state and the big business political parties. Workers voted down Vale's punitive

concessionary contract by some 88 percent last July. In March, after eight months walking picket lines in the frigid cold of Northern Ontario, they voted down another miserable contract offer by an even larger margin!

If the Inco workers' no-concessions struggle now stands in mortal jeopardy, it is entirely due to the actions of the union bureaucracy, which acts not as the representative of the membership but rather as an arm of the corporations within the rank and file. They have policed the anti-worker injunctions issued by the courts and signalled their readiness to accept massive concessions. Now they are imploring Vale Inco management—and the labour board—to allow them to play a role in designing the back-to-work protocols in hopes that, by doing so, they will maintain a semblance of credibility amongst their membership.

This week's blockade shows the way forward. Workers must take the strike out of the hands of the bureaucracy and organize rank-and-file committees independent of the USW to shut down scab production and strive to make their struggle the spearhead of a working-class counteroffensive against big business' drive to make working people pay for the capitalist crisis through wage and job cuts and the dismantling of public and social services.

Above all, Vale Inco workers and their supporters must draw the political lessons.

The traditions of militant working-class struggle associated with cities such as Sudbury must be revived and imbued with a program to mobilize the working class in independent industrial and political struggle against concessions and in defense of the jobs of all workers, the world over. If capitalism is incapable of providing working people with a decent standard of living—and it cannot—then working people, those whose collective labour produces society's wealth, must advance their own plan to organize production and employment internationally based on human need, not private profit and shareholder value.



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