

Steelworkers union forces end to year-long Vale-Inco strike

Keith Jones
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After a year on the picket line, 3,300 Vale-Inco nickel miners and ancillary workers in Sudbury and Port Colborne, Ontario have grudgingly accepted a concessions-laden contract recommended by the United Steelworkers (USW) union.

One of the world's largest mining companies, the Brazilian-based Vale mounted an unprecedented scabbing operation in Sudbury, a mining center that was one of the cradles of industrial unionism in Canada.

Vale-Inco's strikebreaking campaign was aided and abetted by the provincial Liberal government, the courts and the police. But the USW, Ontario Federation of Labor, and Canadian Labor Congress played a no less indispensable role in facilitating the scabbing. The union apparatus systematically isolated the strike.

Not only did the unions not lift a finger to mobilize workers across Ontario, Canada and internationally to take action in support of the Vale-Inco strikers. The USW instructed office and technical workers in Sudbury, who were governed by a separate USW collective agreement, to abide by the company's orders that they perform strikers' work. Then, just as Vale-Inco was ratcheting up its strikebreaking campaign, the USW negotiated a new separate contract for these workers that allowed the scabbing to proceed completely unimpeded.

USW District 6 Director Wayne Fraser said he was "pleased with the deal"—pleased no doubt because the end of the strike means that an increasingly tense situation in Sudbury has been defused. For several days in May, several hundred strikers and their supporters blockaded two entrances to the sprawling Vale-Inco mine-mill complex, defying the police, and for a time, spurning union appeals that they end the protest.

Under the new five-year contract, Vale-Inco has succeeded in imposing both a limit on the nickel bonus that is paid workers when nickel prices rise above a certain level and a major increase in the benchmark price that must be reached before the bonus is paid. This measure alone could, depending on the fluctuations in the world price of nickel, cost workers many thousands of dollars in lost income per year.

The union has also accepted a two-tier pension system. New hires will be enrolled in a defined-contribution as opposed to defined-benefit scheme.

Over the five-year life of the agreement workers' base wage will increase by just 90 cents per hour.

Also, the union failed to win the reinstatement of eight workers fired by the company during the strike. Their fate has been left entirely in the hands of the Ontario Labor Relations Board.

According to the union, about 75 percent of those participating in the ratification vote approved the five-year contract.

This figure grossly distorts the sentiments of the workers.

Many workers—as attested by interviews they gave to the *Sudbury Star* and other media and by various blogs—were irate over the terms of the contract. However, it was generally recognized that the USW was prostrate before Vale-Inco and that there was, therefore, little point in prolonging the strike, which on this coming Tuesday (July 13) would have been a year old.

In recent days many strikers have vented their anger at the union. USW Local 6500 President "Fera is toast" wrote one blogger. "I'm calling the CAW (Canadian Auto Workers)," commented another. A common refrain appears to be that the USW was indifferent to the plight of the Sudbury workers because it is

headquartered in Pittsburgh and the majority of its members are in the US.

This nationalist reaction is not accidental. Throughout the strike the USW promoted reactionary Canadian nationalism, claiming that the Brazilian-based Vale was hostile to “Canadian values.” But Canadian mining companies and other Canadian-based transnationals scour the planet, seeking like Vale does to maximize profits at the expense of working people and the environment.

While it did nothing to stop the scabbing campaign, the USW urged workers to lobby big business politicians in Ottawa and Toronto to pass an anti-scab law and to adopt investment legislation giving the government greater power over foreign takeovers. Inco was bought by Vale in 2006.

This is in keeping with the nationalist, pro-capitalist perspective advanced by the USW and the unions as a whole. Calls for protectionism, which pit workers against each other along national lines, go hand in hand with the most slavish collaboration with “our” Canadian or American bosses in imposing speed-up and concessions.

That the problems of the Vale-Inco strike will not be solved by organizing themselves on “Canadian lines” is well-illustrated by the evolution of the Canadian Auto Workers. It has acted no differently than the US-based UAW and last year reopened contracts at GM and Chrysler to impose massive wage and benefit cuts.

The reality is that all over the world workers have come up against the impotence of the unions and their transformation into auxiliaries of big business that work with management in disciplining workers, cutting jobs and increasing profits.

The collapse of the unions is rooted in their submission to and support for capitalism, as well as their nationalist orientation.

The Vale-Inco strike was testimony to the militancy and capacity for self-sacrifice of working people. Nevertheless, it proved to be yet another in a long series of defeated strikes.

Workers must begin to draw the lessons of these experiences, which are common to working people all over the world.

Working people must break with the moribund unions and develop new organs of struggle that seek to organize the struggles of the working class across

national boundaries and continents. To defeat globally-organized corporations, workers must organize themselves as an international class.

Above all workers must take the road of political struggle—building a new mass party of the working class that advances a socialist program to break the stranglehold big business has over economic life, so production and employment can be organized to meet human needs rather than enrich the few.



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