

Canada: Steelworkers union finalizing concessions contract at Vale

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After several weeks of negotiations under the auspices of labour mediator Kevin Burkett, the bargaining committees of United Steelworkers Local 6500 in Sudbury and Local 6200 in Port Colborne, Ontario, have all but finalized a wholesale concessions contract with mining giant Vale (formerly Vale Inco).

The strike of 3,300 miners, smelter and mill workers began nearly one year ago, on 13 July 2009. The dispute is the longest in the more than one hundred year history of nickel mining in the Sudbury basin.

On June 22, the company and the steelworkers' leadership came to an agreement on virtually every contract demand placed on workers by the Vale management.

Among other measures in the contract, a nickel bonus distributed to workers for the past twenty-eight years in exchange for previous wage concessions will be drastically cut, a two-tier pension scheme will be imposed, and new rules will be implemented to speed up the pace of work.

In many respects, the deal is the same as the contract that was voted down in March by a resounding 89 percent of the membership. There is speculation, however, that the new contract will differ from the March proposal in that it will straightjacket the membership for five years rather than the traditional three-year time span for a collective agreement.

However, just as the memorandums of agreement were being drawn up, a dispute arose between management and the union on the precise mechanism to resolve the issue of eight of nine strikers previously

victimized by the company (one of the nine has since been allowed to retire). USW officials are cynically manipulating the case of the fired workers to distract the rank-and-file from the rotten contract.

The nine workers were fired as a result of a frame-up orchestrated by Vale and the notorious strike-breaking security firm AFI International. Over the course of the bitter, year-long battle Vale has mounted an unprecedented scabbing operation that has been 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.

To enforce the scabbing operation, Vale hired AFI to intimidate and harass strikers on a daily basis. This included the deployment of parabolic listening devices around picket shacks. Information gathered in the eavesdropping operation was used to fire the nine workers.

Although none of the victimized men have been charged by the police with any offence, Vale has used the firings as an ever-present bargaining chip in their dealings with the union. In May, union lawyers succeeded in petitioning the Ontario Labour Relations Board (OLRB) to require the negotiating teams to set aside the matter of the victimized strikers until all other matters in the strike had been resolved. If at that time the parties could not settle the issue it would be taken up by the OLRB for final adjudication.

Vale and the USW, however, could not agree on the exact "adjudicative avenues" through which the cases of the eight fired strikers would be submitted. Apparently, the USW wanted the case sent to an

independent arbitrator, whilst Vale is insisting that since no contract existed during the strike, the matter must be decided directly by the labour board. The deadlock forced mediator Burkett to terminate his participation in the negotiations. On Friday both the union and the company were called in front of Ontario Minister of Labour Peter Fonseca to explain the reasons for the eleventh hour logjam. The union has called membership information meetings scheduled for July 5 and 6.

USW District 6 leader Wayne Fraser and Sudbury Local 6500 officials well know that the contract they are about to recommend for ratification is a betrayal of the workers' determined one-year struggle. They are using the eleventh hour dispute with the company over the victimized strikers as a fig leaf to cover their outright capitulation to Vale's draconian demands.

Whatever the fate of the eight workers, the union leadership is determined to push the deal through at the earliest opportunity. On Thursday, John Fera, president of Local 6500 told the press, “[H]opefully we can hold meetings next week—early next week—and hopefully, if we're able to, have a vote, if everything works out.”

The impasse in which the Vale 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 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 workers' militant anti-concessions strike is at a crossroads. The strike under the political and organizational leadership of the USW is being strangled and defeated. The union bureaucracy is betting that its prostration before court orders barring effective picketing, combined with the tremendous hardship and fatigue experienced by its membership, will convince strikers to ratify a contract similar to one they voted so overwhelmingly against only a few months ago.

Vale 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 unite their struggle with miners and other workers 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 on human need, not the profits of the few.



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