

US Steel locks out 1,000 workers in Nanticoke, Ontario

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Nearly 1,000 steelworkers employed by US Steel Corp. at its Lake Erie plant in Nanticoke, near Hamilton, Ontario, were locked out April 28 after workers voted to reject the company's "final" contract offer. Members of the United Steelworkers union (USW), the locked-out workers are fighting company demands for a wage freeze, elimination of cost-of-living increases and cuts to prescription drug payments, vacations and other benefit provisions.

The Nanticoke plant produces around 10 percent of the company's global steel output. Under conditions where demand for steel is extremely low due to the global economic recession and the Canadian dollar is near historic highs, management is content to play a waiting game. It is confident that it can make up any shortfalls in production at its USW-organized facilities in the United States.

It is the third time that the company has locked out Hamilton-area workers since it took over Stelco, once Canada's largest steelmaker, in 2007. Three years ago, US Steel locked out Nanticoke workers for eight months before the union agreed to a contract that saw the imposition of a two-tier pension system and job losses. And in October 2011, US Steel lifted an almost year-long lockout at its Hilton Works in Hamilton after the union signed on to a concessions-laden contract that imposed hundreds of layoffs, a wage freeze, a two-tier pension system, cuts to cost-of-living adjustments, and an end to the indexing of retiree pensions.

Both the agreements at Nanticoke and Hilton were virtually identical to the company offers that preceded the lengthy lockouts. After watching the USW do nothing to mobilize the industrial power of steelworkers across North America to oppose US Steel's companywide concessions drive and with their Employment Insurance (EI) benefits expiring or their EI-eligibility still in dispute, workers at both facilities reluctantly ratified the

concessionary contracts.

The bitter truth facing Nanticoke workers today is that the USW offers nothing but the same in the current struggle. Already union bureaucrats are exhorting workers to prepare for a lengthy lockout, whilst trying to divert attention from their opposition to any genuine struggle by spouting reactionary Canadian nationalist bombast.

US Steel, they argue, has consistently shipped work formerly done at the Lake Erie works south of the border, whilst failing to account for why the union—which organizes workers throughout North America—has consistently refused to launch continent-wide strike action against the company.

Indeed, such is the contempt of the USW for its own membership that almost a week into the current lockout neither the web site of the international union based in Pittsburgh nor that of the Canadian National Office has posted a public statement or even advisory on the Nanticoke events. In any case, the current concession demands being pushed by US Steel at its Lake Erie Works seek to "whip-saw" that plant's contract with the give-back deal the USW signed in 2011 at Stelco's onetime flagship facility, the Hilton works in Hamilton.

Steelworkers must begin to take the measure of the USW—an organization that acts on behalf of the company to police the workforce, as shown by a review of the USW's treachery in a string of recent strikes and lockouts.

During the 11-month lockout at the Hilton Works, the USW (not to mention the Ontario Federation of Labour and the Canadian Labour Congress) refused to organize any industrial action in support of the locked-out US Steel workers and systematically isolated their struggle from those of Canada Post, Air Canada, and other workers facing similar concession demands. Moreover, the USW instructed its members at US Steel's American operations to continue working, preventing any united struggle

against the steel giant, and ensuring the company could meet all its orders.

In Sudbury, at the giant nickel mining complex of Vale Inco, USW officials forced an end to a year-long strike, pushing through ratification of a concessions-laden contract, which included a two-tier pension plan and give-backs on bonuses, work rules and other benefits.

In that strike, USW leaders substituted occasional media stunts for militant strike action, kowtowed to the courts at every turn, and even acquiesced to the company's use of USW-organized office and technical workers to do the strikers' work. When strikers sought to blockade entrances to the Sudbury mining complex, the union worked with the judiciary and the Ontario government and Labour Board to demobilize the workers and dismantle the barricades.

In a 2009 strike at National Steel Car in Hamilton, workers grudgingly ratified a new contract imposing concessions on two-tier wages, seniority rights and work rules by a margin of 64 percent. Only a week before, 67 percent of the strikers had voted to reject a very similar concessions-filled agreement. The USW, in a tried and true maneuver of union bureaucrats everywhere, simply demanded of the Steel Car membership: "Vote until you get it right"! A week after workers at the plant voted to end the bitter, three-month strike, the company announced that it was laying off the entire workforce until new orders could be secured. The union, concerned only about sustaining its dues base to pay the bloated salaries and perks of its officialdom, took no action save to contemplate possibilities to organize a prospective, new facility opening up in Alabama.

The prostration of the unions is a worldwide phenomenon rooted in the break-up of the post-Second World War boom and the globalization of production. Nationally based organizations rooted in the acceptance of capitalist property relations—that is the subordination of economic life to investor profits—the unions have responded to the transnationals' shifting of production to wherever labor is cheapest and most productive, by joining with the bosses in demanding that workers make their employers more "competitive" through concessions, speed-up and job cuts.

And while integrating themselves ever more completely into management, the unions have sought to deflect worker anger over their subservience to the corporations by calling on big business governments, like the current federal Conservative government, to defend "Canadian" jobs and enact protectionist measures to support

"Canadian" companies.

Among Canadian union bureaucrats, USW leaders have been "first among equals" in fulminating against workers in other countries, while peddling the lie that Canadian-owned businesses—like the big banks that helped organize the restructuring of the steel industry at workers' expense over the past decade—are less rapacious than US Steel, Vale Inco, and other foreign "interlopers."

This nationalist, pro-capitalist perspective serves to block any united action on the part of workers in North America and around the world against the transnational giants of the global steel industry that are relentlessly seeking to intensify the exploitation of all workers, irrespective of their nationality.

To answer the steel giants' global assault on job and wages, workers must take the leadership of their struggles out of the hands of the union officialdom, form rank-and-file strike committees independent of the USW, and consciously strive to unite their fight with steelworkers and all other workers in the United States and around the world.

Above all, 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.

If capitalism is incapable of providing working people with a decent standard of living—and it can't—then working people, those whose collective labor 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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