

Niles Niemuth brings Socialist Equality Party congressional campaign to US Steel workers in suburban Detroit

Our reporter
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Workers at the US Steel Great Lakes Works in the Downriver Detroit suburb of Ecorse, Michigan stopped and spoke with Niles Niemuth, the Socialist Equality Party's (SEP) candidate for the 12th Congressional District in Michigan as they came off their shift Monday afternoon. Niles addressed the issues confronting steelworkers who have not had pay raises in years, and who face constant speedup and dangerous work conditions.

Last month, 16,000 workers at steel mills across the country owned by US Steel voted unanimously to authorize the United Steelworkers union (USW) to call a strike. This was followed by a unanimous strike vote by 15,000 workers at ArcelorMittal, the world's largest steel producer. The two companies made combined second-quarter profits of \$2.1 billion, chiefly due to Trump's tariffs on foreign-made steel, corporate tax cuts and the wage freezes and other concessions agreed to by the USW in the last labor agreement.

An estimated 1,400 workers are employed at US Steel Great Lakes Works, plus large numbers of lower-paid contractors who do not receive company-paid health care and other benefits.

"We gave up huge concessions last time and we haven't had a raise in three and a half years," one steelworker with 18 years at the mill told Niles. "It's ridiculous. The companies are making billions. If it comes down to a strike, we'll do what we have to do."

Ignoring the unanimous strike mandate by the membership, the USW has forced workers to labor for more than a month after the September 1 expiration of their contracts. The USW is telling workers that it must remain at the bargaining table even though the companies have doubled down on their concession

demands, including sweeping cutbacks in health care benefits and the introduction of a second tier of lower-paid workers.

Niles told workers that rank-and-file steelworkers should form factory committees, independent of the USW, to take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands. He said steelworkers should unite with autoworkers, teachers, UPS workers and others in a common fight. Niles explained that, as a socialist, he fights for US workers to unite with their class brothers and sisters internationally.

"I agree with uniting with workers all over the world," said Mary, another veteran steelworker. "When I started here it was National Steel," she said, referring to the company that was owned by Japan-based Nippon Kokan before it went bankrupt and was sold off to US Steel. "Things have changed drastically over the last two decades. They've combined lots of jobs and now one worker is doing the job that would have taken three workers before.

"Crane operators are always told to 'Hurry up, hurry up.' But if you do one thing wrong they can fire you. That is the source of so many accidents. Here in Ecorse a contract worker was killed when his crane tipped over. One of our workers was crushed by a truck that was backing up on the loading dock. Management denied it but before her death they were always screaming, 'Get those trucks in and out of here as quick as you can.' There have been so many accidents, you can hardly keep up with them," she concluded.

A list of recent fatal accidents at the mill, including those noted by Mary, includes:

- In May 2017, a 32-year-old contractor for Mid-American Group fell to his death.

• On April 18, 2015, 41-year-old steelworker Heather D. Warren was killed as a semi-truck backing up with steel coils crushed her to death while she was acting as a spotter for another truck on the loading dock. Rather than holding US Steel accountable, the Wayne County prosecutor charged the driver, a contract worker, with manslaughter, a crime punishable by up to 15 years in prison.

• On April 4, 2014, 36-year-old Chris Castro, a contractor with Connelly Crane and a father of three was killed when his crane tipped over near the number two oxygen furnace.

• In December 2013, Antonio Palazzolo, a 31-year-old US Steel employee and a father of two, was killed in an explosion when an oxygen furnace failed, causing 2,500-degree liquid metal to burn through a wall and onto a snowfield.

Last year a Facebook post by a crane operator at the Ecorse mill who was hospitalized along with other coworkers after being exposed to deadly methyl mercaptan gas detailed the deadly conditions at the plant. The post by Nicolas Doyle, which was shared tens of thousands of times, exposed the callous indifference of management to health and safety, as well as the role of the USW, which functions as a tool of the corporation.

Far from opposing these attacks, the USW has collaborated with the corporation's "Carnegie Way" cost-cutting plans in the name of boosting US Steel's competitiveness and profitability, while promoting the lie that Trump's trade war measures would benefit workers. During the last contract negotiations in 2015, the union blocked a strike by US Steel, ArcelorMittal and Allegheny Technologies workers and agreed to another sellout contract that further rolled back the living standards and conditions of workers.

The USW is reprising its treacherous role in the current talks. On Saturday, afternoon, the USW reached a tentative agreement for a new four-year agreement with Cleveland Cliffs, North America's largest producer of iron ore pellets. The company employs 1,800 USW taconite miners and iron ore processing workers in Minnesota and Michigan.

The USW claims the new agreement is a "landmark deal" and Cleveland Cliffs compensated workers for the sacrifices the union agreed to in the last contract. CEO Lourenco Goncalves, however, sang a different

tune, gloating in a statement that the deal "provides Cliffs with a competitive cost structure for future success." He praised the USW, saying, "This agreement once again reinforces that we have more in common with the USW than we have differences, and we look forward to continuing our strong partnership."

While full details are not yet available, this is no doubt another sweetheart deal that defends the corporation and the income and institutional interests of the USW bureaucracy. This is the first time the USW has settled with iron ore producers instead of the steelmakers first, and the concessions contained in the Cleveland Cliffs agreement will no doubt serve as a precedent for further cuts at US Steel and ArcelorMittal.

After speaking to workers at the US Steel mill, Niles told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "Workers are angry that they are being kept on the job weeks after voting unanimously to strike. I made it clear to them that the United Steelworkers union was not on their side but was working with the company to push through another sellout contract.

"If workers are going to fight for good-paying and secure jobs and to end the deadly conditions in the steel mills, they are going to have to form rank-and-file factory committees to unite all steelworkers and other sections of the working class. Workers should also reject the America-First nationalism of Trump and the USW. Companies like US Steel and ArcelorMittal are transnational corporations and the only way they can be fought is through the international unity of the working class," the SEP's candidate concluded.

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