

After rebelling against USW-backed deal, 2,400 Canadian miners launch strike against multinational Vale Inco

Roger Jordan
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A strike of 2,400 miners in Sudbury, northern Ontario, began yesterday after the workforce overwhelmingly voted down a concessions-laden contract that was recommended by the United Steelworkers (USW) union. The determined stand taken by the miners, employed by multinational Vale Inco, is the latest example of a growing rebellion of the working class across North America against the trade union bureaucracy, which is collaborating with the employers everywhere to enforce the dictates of big business and the financial oligarchy.

The Vale Inco workers, who mine and refine nickel, copper, gold, silver and cobalt across five mines, a mill and a smelter in Sudbury, rejected the contract by 70 percent in a vote Monday night in which 87 percent of the workforce participated. The five-year deal would have included a miserly 4 percent pay increase, which amounts to a substantial paycut when mounting inflation is factored in.

Workers are also outraged that they have been forced to work throughout the COVID-19 pandemic with inadequate safety protections. The USW negotiators sought to bribe the workers into accepting the deal with a miserable \$2,500 bonus for staying on the job during the pandemic, which amounts to a slap in the face for a workforce that has risked their lives to protect the bottom line of Vale Inco, one of the world's largest mining companies.

In fact, the past year has gone fabulously well for the Brazilian-based multinational, with one USW official telling the *Sudbury Star* that the company has obtained "record profits." The USW created the conditions for this orgy of money making by agreeing to a special one-year contract last June to ensure production would continue uninterrupted. As the USW official noted, referring to a series of local worksites, "We've had Creighton, Coleman, Garson, and Totten deemed outbreaks, and we continued to work right through them."

The USW is determined to isolate and suppress the strike as soon as it can. The union even contrived to separate the workers at the Sudbury sites, represented by USW Local 6500, from those in Port Colborne, who reportedly voted to accept the same rotten contract.

However, the union leadership is well aware that anger

among the workers over management's intransigence is at the boiling point and that the strike could rapidly escape its control. This explains the defensive tone of the union's statement announcing the repudiation of the contract it had recommended to the workers. "Thank you for your overwhelming support to return us to the bargaining table," the USW cynically declared. "We are newly energized with this result and are looking forward to bringing your message to the company to let them know our work is not complete."

This is a sham. The only thing about the USW union bureaucrats that will be "energized" is their determination to sell out the strike at the earliest opportunity by imposing a contract that is more or less identical with the one just voted down.

The Vale Inco strike takes place under conditions of a dramatic upsurge of the class struggle across Canada and the United States that has increasingly taken the form of an open rebellion by workers against the union bureaucracy. At Warrior Met Coal in Alabama, around 1,100 miners are entering their third month on strike after voting down a union-backed contract by 1,006 votes to 45. At Volvo Truck's plant in Dublin, Virginia, workers waged a two-week strike in April, voted by 91 percent to repudiate a deal cooked up by the United Auto Workers and are mobilizing to defeat a second sellout this Sunday. The USW continues to isolate 1,300 striking Allegheny Technologies workers, who walked off the job on March 30, and in Texas 650 ExxonMobil refinery workers have been locked out since May 1.

Similar developments are under way in Canada. A strike of 2,500 ArcelorMittal steelworkers, who are also in the USW, began on May 10 in northeastern Quebec. After an initial contract supported by the union was roundly rejected on May 1, the USW felt compelled to recommend that the second proposal, presented to workers May 7, be rejected and that a strike be called. But the union has opposed any broader mobilization for the workers, including from the 600,000-strong Quebec Federation of Labour, to which the five USW locals engaged in the strike are affiliated.

In late April, the Trudeau Liberal government intervened to

criminalize a strike by over 1,100 dockers at the Port of Montreal called in opposition to speedup, casualization and a ruthless disciplinary regime. Strikes by 1,100 workers at an Olymel pork packing plant and over 600 workers at an Exceldor chicken processing plant in Quebec are ongoing.

These struggles are being driven by the pent-up anger of workers across all economic sectors over sharply rising prices for basic necessities due to inflation, as well as the shameless enrichment of the superrich amid the mass deaths of the pandemic as the stock markets hit record highs. This is compounded by the decades of union-backed attacks on wages, working conditions and jobs across Canada and the US that have seen the evisceration of workers' rights across all sectors, including auto workers, steelworkers, teachers, public sector workers, postal workers and many more.

Both the long-term onslaught on workers' rights stretching back to the 1980s and the ruthless "profits before lives" policy pursued during the pandemic have been endorsed by the entire Canadian political establishment. Successive governments at the federal and provincial levels have virtually abrogated the right to strike and deployed the full force of the state, including the courts and police, to intimidate striking and protesting workers.

While the constant refrain workers hear is that there is no money for decent wages, secure jobs and stable pensions, the Liberals, Conservatives and New Democrats have found hundreds of billions of dollars to shower on Canada's major corporations and banks during the pandemic, and rearm its ever-expanding military to pursue Canadian imperialism's predatory interests around the world.

In this bitter class conflict, the USW and the entire union bureaucracy stands on the side of the ruling elite. The USW has led the way in urging the Trudeau government to align itself with the Biden administration's reactionary protectionist agenda by pushing for a "North America first" policy, which is aimed at laying the economic basis for a military conflict with Russia and China.

When Trump was in the White House, the USW campaigned for the closest support for the fascist-minded president's nationalist economic policies by boasting that Canadian-made steel and aluminum were essential to the manufacturing of US tanks, fighter jets and military equipment.

The USW has also lined up behind Biden's push to "win the competition of the 21st century" against China, which depends upon establishing North America's unchallenged dominance in the market for electric vehicles and other clean technologies. The mines in Sudbury could play a major part in this, since nickel is competing with lithium as a critical component in the production of EV batteries—a lucrative market that could generate hundreds of billions of dollars in profits, dividend payouts and fat salaries for company executives and union bureaucrats for years to come. In this context, the USW's determination to enforce a concessions-filled agreement on the

Sudbury workers comes as no surprise.

The USW's failed attempt to ram through a contract that grants all of the mining multinational's demands is merely the latest episode in a long series of betrayals of the Vale Inco workforce. During a bitter yearlong strike lasting from July 2009 to July 2010, the USW facilitated the company's use of scabs for the first time in its history to ensure profits continued flowing as the miners walked the picket lines. The union ordered administrative workers in the USW to perform the work of strikers, before concluding a separate sellout deal for them when their contract expired rather than calling them out on strike with the miners. The USW eventually ended the strike by agreeing to the gutting of the workers' pension plan and the cutting of the nickel bonus paid to workers when the precious metal rises above a certain price, a move that cost miners thousands of dollars each year.

To prevail in their strike for a wage increase, improved working conditions and better pensions, Vale Inco miners must break out of the straitjacket imposed on them by the USW and establish a rank-and-file strike committee to lead their struggle. This committee should appeal for a unified struggle by workers across Canada, Mexico and the United States, including Alabama coal miners, Volvo autoworkers in Virginia, and Quebec steelworkers and meatpackers, to overturn all concessions and decent-paying, secure jobs for all.

In waging such a fight, the striking miners can draw on a long and proud tradition of worker militancy in Sudbury. The first union locals were organized in 1913 by the Western Federation of Miners led by the legendary socialist Big Bill Haywood. For close to two decades during the 1940s and 1950s, Inco's miners were represented by Local 598 of the International Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers union, which was led by the Stalinist Communist Party of Canada. In the winter of 1961-62, a vicious red-baiting campaign led by the USW with the support of the Catholic Church culminated in the United Steelworkers seizing control of the local from the IMMSW.

The best elements of these militant traditions must be fused with a socialist political perspective fighting for the international unification of the working class to put an end to the capitalist system and place the needs of working people, the vast majority of society, ahead of private profit. To organize and coordinate this struggle, the *World Socialist Web Site* urges striking Vale Inco workers and their class brothers and sisters across North America to support the building of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.



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