

As Vale Inco nickel miners' walkout in Ontario prepares to enter second week, critical lessons posed by 2009-10 strike

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A few hours after the beginning of the strike at the Vale Inco nickel mining complex in Sudbury, Ontario, last Tuesday, company security called police on picketing miners. The incident took place shortly after miners, members of United Steelworkers (USW) Local 6500, decisively voted down a concessions contract recommended by the union. After rejecting the agreement, the workers had quickly moved to set up picket lines at several entrances to the mines and processing centers at midnight on June 1.

The company complaint of a “large gathering” of peaceful strikers at one of the gates was enough for police to mobilize. Although no charges were laid, corporate security told police that they wanted the occurrence to be recorded. Over the ensuing days police have regularly visited picket lines to liaise with company security goons, while surveilling and attempting to intimidate the strikers. “Officers will continue to visit the various sites throughout the strike in order to maintain peace and order,” said police spokesperson Kaitlyn Dunn.

Many of the 2,600 striking workers will be entirely familiar with this early power play by mine management. During the yearlong 2009-10 strike at the mine, all the forces of the state—the police, the courts, the Labour Board and the provincial Liberal government—came to Vale’s defense and worked to ensure its continued operation through scabbing. The professional strikebreakers hired by the company were protected at every turn while striking miners were simultaneously subjected to surveillance, firings, court injunctions and arrests.

Over the course of the last strike, thousands of families of striking miners were forced into food banks, divorce courts, hospitals and even suicide. The fact that the company was allowed to get away with its brutal strikebreaking operations was due above all to the USW, which played a critical role in facilitating Vale Inco’s scabbing.

But just as in 2009, workers are entering into the struggle determined to fight Vale’s attempt to foist yet another concession-laden contract onto their backs. The rejected deal provides for a meager 4 percent wage increase slowly spread out over a five-year period. As a result, the standard wage would increase by only \$1.35 over the life of the contract, likely to be quickly eaten up and overtaken by rising prices. Only two weeks ago, Statistics Canada released its latest projection on annual inflation which shows a year-over-year jump of 3.2 percent in the cost of living.

In addition, the company is demanding the removal of retiree health benefits for all new hires in the relentless stripping of benefits from the ever-expanding second-tier workforce. Management is also seeking to end almost all over-the-counter pharmaceutical coverage and eliminate new hire eligibility for all insurances and hospital service coverage.

In order to supposedly make up for the workers agreeing last year to a special miserly one-year contract, which was rammed through by the

USW to ensure that production continued without interruption during the deadly pandemic, a paltry \$2,500 pandemic bonus has been offered. In a failed attempt to induce workers to ratify the tentative agreement, a one-time signing bonus of \$3,500 was also proposed.

At the ratification meeting, where the deal was voted down by 70 percent, workers were outraged that the union could endorse such a pro-company proposal at a time when Vale profits are soaring, with new battery technologies requiring large quantities of high-grade Sudbury nickel.

Mark Lambovitch, a veteran worker who weathered the 2009-10 strike, spoke for many workers when he told Sudbury.com, “I don’t want to do that again, and I’m sure no one does, but we have to stand up for ourselves. Otherwise, we will just keep losing. This company makes billions of dollars, and they just can’t give us a fair deal? If you come underground, do the work we do and see the conditions, we’re not being greedy.”

The very fact that the USW leadership negotiated and then recommended the miserable contract rejected by the membership should stand as a stark warning. Just as in the previous strike, the USW plans on isolating and starving the strikers into submission, in order to maintain the union’s comfortable relations with the steel and mining companies and prevent the miners struggle from spreading and becoming the spearhead of a working class-led counteroffensive against wage cuts and attacks on working conditions.

To prevent such an outcome, it is critical that miners draw the lessons of the 2009-10 strike, in particular, that new rank-and-file organizations, independent of the pro-corporate USW, are needed in order to expand and win their struggle.

The 2009-10 Vale Inco strike

When miners last walked out in 2009, Vale gradually began ramping up production in Sudbury using scores of contractors, managers and so-called replacement workers, i.e., scabs. The USW occupied a crucial role in this anti-worker scabbing operation. Firstly, it permitted 56 skilled members from USW Local 2020, which organizes 240 office, technical and professional workers at the complex, to scab on the strike, enabling the company to restart minimal mine and copper concentrate mill operations in October 2009.

Then, when the contract for Local 2020 expired several months into the strike, placing all 240 workers in a position to strike with their colleagues from Local 6500, the USW ordered them to stay on the job and reached a

separate sellout deal with Vale. As if this wasn't bad enough, the new contract legally compelled Local 2020 members to break the strike of their fellow workers.

Predictably, this rotten USW-led sellout led to tensions between Local 6500 and Local 2020 members, which was no doubt the desired outcome on the part of the union. This was a critical element of the union's broader efforts to systematically isolate the striking miners.

To enforce the scabbing operation, Vale hired the notorious strikebreaking security firm AFI to intimidate and harass strikers on a daily basis. This included the deployment of cameras and parabolic listening devices around picket shacks. Information gathered in the eavesdropping operation was used to illegally fire nine workers, who had to wait two years before they were exonerated. WSWs reporters filmed some of this strikebreaking activity in this 2010 video at the picket lines.

In January 2010, smelter production was restarted. Alongside management and technical staff, Vale mobilized contractors and hundreds of scab replacement workers, many of whom were permanently bivouacked inside the mining complex. In response to this unprecedented provocation (scabs had never before been deployed in an Inco labour dispute), the USW International and Local 6500 officialdom staged publicity stunts at various international corporate venues, issued nationalist harangues and organized the occasional isolated demonstration.

By the early months of 2010, the union bureaucracy was betting that its prostration before court orders barring effective picketing, combined with the tremendous hardship and fatigue experienced by its membership, would convince strikers to ratify a contract similar to the one they voted so overwhelmingly against only a few months before. The workers, however, had other ideas and in the spring voted down another rotten contract offer and organized powerful road blockades at key gate entrances supported by hundreds of workers and townspeople.

The action received such a popular response that police backed away from a direct confrontation. When a sheriff read a court's cease-and-desist order to the hundreds of protesters, the demonstrators refused to move, chanting, "Hell no, we won't go." The police, who had so far counted on the machinations of the union officials to prevent the strike from becoming a militant fightback against the company's scabbing operation, were clearly unprepared for resistance to their order to disperse and retired without further action.

It was left up to union officials to disperse the burgeoning rank-and-file protest. Local 6500 President John Fera, Vice President Rick Bertrand and Chief Steward Pascal Boucher immediately visited the protest sites to tell workers that they could face legal consequences if they did not stop their action. Vale Inco had already summarily dismissed at least nine strikers during the dispute for not "acting within (Vale's) code of conduct." A special membership meeting was called, replete with union lawyers.

The union bureaucrats pulled out all the stops, preaching faith in the courts and claiming that a new Labour Board hearing would ultimately rescue them. They urged workers to look for support from the big business federal and Ontario Liberal Party leaders and the social democratic NDP. Seeing that the union would not back any action to stop the scabbing operation and defend victimized workers, the blockades were abandoned. By July, exhausted and impoverished, miners reluctantly ratified a concessions-filled agreement.

During this strike, miners and smelter workers in northern Ontario showed no shortage of militancy and sacrifice in struggle. But what they lacked was a political perspective and an independent workers' organization to lead their struggle to victory.

The USW had a definite strategy: isolate the strikers, cooperate with the company's strikebreaking operations, and wait for the right moment to ram through management's dictates that the strikers had already twice rejected. This flows directly from its subservience to the capitalist profit system and its promotion of nationalist divisions among workers, which

served to consolidate the USW's role as appendages of corporate management at Vale Inco. This is a strategy that has been pursued by trade union bureaucrats in every economic sector in Canada and internationally since the 1980s, when the unions began their transformation into junior partners of big business and the capitalist state.

For their loyal defense of corporate interests, the executives who operate the USW, like their counterparts elsewhere, have acquired incomes and wealth which place them in direct conflict with workers. As of 2020, the USW was sitting on assets of over \$1.5 billion, which is not used for the benefit of workers but rather to pad the bank accounts of USW leaders and provide them various perks. Union President Thomas Conway received compensation of over \$217,000 last year, and dozens of other officials were awarded bloated six-figure salaries.

Conditions are now ripe for striking Vale Inco miners to put an end to these decades of union betrayals and sellouts. Their strike coincides with an upsurge of the class struggle across Canada and internationally, including 2,500 ArcelorMittal workers in northeastern Quebec, striking miners in Colombia, Peru and Chile, coal miners in Alabama, Volvo Truck workers in Virginia, among many others. Strikers at Vale Inco must consciously fight to unify their struggle with all of these class battles in order to mobilize the full social power of the international working class against the ruthless demands of multinational conglomerates like Vale Inco, Volvo, BHP and ArcelorMittal.

To conduct this fight, Vale Inco workers should immediately elect a rank-and-file strike committee constituted independently of and in opposition to the USW. Such committees must base themselves on what workers actually need, not what Vale and the USW claim the company can afford, and should advance a series of non-negotiable demands, such as a 25 percent pay increase to make up for years of concessions, full medical insurance for all workers, and a reinstatement of the defined benefit pension program for all workers and retirees.

To link their struggle with similar strikes developing among miners, steelworkers and other sections of industrial workers internationally, striking Vale Inco workers should support the construction of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, which is being established to unite workers across national borders and internationally coordinate the fight against corporate attacks on workers' jobs and lives.

The need for new organizations is bound together with the need for a new political perspective. In opposition to the pro-corporate and nationalist outlook promoted relentlessly by the unions, miners must recognize that they face a political struggle against not only one particularly ruthless employer but rather the capitalist system as a whole, which exploits the workers of the world in order to enrich a tiny minority of superrich oligarchs. The alternative posed is the fight for socialism, including the expropriation of the giant corporations and their placement under workers' democratic control, in order to meet the pressing needs of the majority of the world's population.



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