

Striking miners and their supporters condemn insulting contract offer from Vale at its Sudbury, Ontario operations

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16 June 2021

Anger has erupted among the 2,400 striking Vale miners in Sudbury, Ontario and their supporters after the company sought to present its latest rotten contract offer as generous and informed by concern for the local community.

The Vale workers, who walked out on strike on June 1 after rejecting by 70 percent a proposed contract endorsed by the United Steelworkers (USW) Local 6500 leadership, voted down the Brazil-based mining giant's latest offer last Saturday by a massive 87 percent.

Vale's "revised" offer was very similar to the previously rejected concessions-laden tentative agreement. Among many attacks and rollbacks, it would have eroded current workers' health benefits and abolished retiree health and medical benefits plan for all future hires.

Recognizing the militancy among rank-and-file workers and their outrage at the company's huge profits during the pandemic, USW Local 6500 changed its tune from the first vote, held May 31, and called on workers to reject Vale's latest offer.

The company responded to the thumping rejection of its derisory contract offer with a post on its Facebook page saying that the company was "disappointed" that the USW had not recommended its passage. The post links to a company website page dedicated to cataloguing updates on what it is cynically calling the "Sudbury Labour Situation."

On the "Sudbury Labour Situation" page, the company posted a video in which Dino Otranto, the Chief Operating Officer for Vale's North Atlantic Operations, assures viewers that, just like the workers employed by the company, he lives in Sudbury and is "proud to be part of this strong community."

He proceeds to condescendingly tell viewers that the company listened to workers after the initial contract rejection and that Vale had adjusted the offer accordingly, praising strikers for their "peaceful behaviour."

Mineworkers, their families, friends and other Sudbury residents have responded by flooding the page with comments voicing their outrage over the company's abysmal contract offer and its attempt to posture as the workers' friend.

"Absolutely disgusted with this company. Pathetic contract

offer. They have no idea of the importance of a happy workforce," wrote a commenter named Randy.

"Wait. ... Didn't you guys take billions of \$\$ during COVID? Were your top executives given large bonuses? If the answer is yes to both of these, I dare say you have no legs to stand on. Treat your employees with the dignity and respect they deserve," commented Leah, who told the *World Socialist Web Site* that she has close friends who are employed at Vale's massive Sudbury operations and that the striking workers need all the support and encouragement they can get.

Vale is just one of many big businesses that the federal Liberal government provided vast amounts of cash in the form of wage subsidies during the COVID-19 pandemic. It received a reported \$67.7 million in 2020. Needless to say, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his Liberals handed this significant sum to the company in spite of it continuing to rake in record profits. Such subsidies, which enabled big business executives and shareholders across all economic sectors to enrich themselves fabulously at the expense of the public purse, were also hailed by the trade unions as necessary to save jobs.

The WSWS also spoke with Julia Staddon, who has lived in Sudbury for 15 years and has family members who work for Vale. Staddon says she has witnessed the adverse impacts Vale's drive to maximize profits have had on the community, including the yearlong strike from July 2009 to July 2010, which ended in bitter defeat after the Steelworkers union refused to mobilize the working class against a corporate scabbing operation.

"I can't believe this company is proud of themselves for this offer," Staddon wrote in response to the Facebook post. "The fact that you took Federal handouts for COVID then made BILLIONS in profit is despicable. It shows the true colours of all those in positions of power with this company. Shame on you for trying to spin this."

"We are disappointed with the lies," wrote another commenter, who wished to remain anonymous but criticized the company for attempting to spread misinformation about the striking workers via the press. "Shame on Vale for treating their workers like their hard work doesn't matter. Instead of

creating a post that is a complete double standard, go back to the drawing board and come up with a fair proposal!! Do better for the men and women who work their behinds off for you! Do better for the young people who are interested in a mining career with you! Do better for the men and women who are about to hang up their hats for retirement, after busting their asses off for all of those years. Do better!”

Dozens of other commenters shared similar sentiments. Some spoke of working conditions in which they are exposed to dangerous chemicals and carcinogens, while others pointed to the company’s appalling international track record and its role in numerous dam disasters that have killed hundreds.

One such disaster, the worst industrial accident in Brazil’s history, resulted in mass deaths as well as the dispersion of millions of tonnes of toxic waste. In January 2019, the Brumadinho dam at one of Vale’s mines in southeastern Brazil collapsed, wiping out the entire rural village of Córrego do Feijão.

The dam was used to store iron ore waste. When it gave way, 270 people were killed. A sea of toxic mining by-products wiped out a staff canteen, farms and offices. The alarm system that Vale had installed to warn those working and residing nearby the dam of an emergency never went off. Massive damage was done to the local environment, including the pollution of local rivers.

Another disaster occurred in 2015 when a mining dam operated by Samarco, a Vale subsidiary, collapsed in the Brazilian town of Mariana, killing 19 people and destroying two villages.

In February 2021, Vale was ordered to pay out \$7 billion in compensation to the victims of the Brumadinho disaster, and Brazilian prosecutors charged 16 people with intentional homicide and environmental offences. One of the people charged was Vale’s former president, Fabio Schvartsman.

None of these deadly disasters have hindered Vale from generating multibillion-dollar profits at the expense of their workers, including during the pandemic. Vale’s financial reports indicate that, in the first quarter of 2021 alone, its shareholders were paid \$4.7 billion CAD, and the mining giant’s revenue since the end of March 2021 amounts to a staggering \$15.6 billion CAD.

While the outrage felt by the strikers and their supporters towards Vale is entirely appropriate, it must be stressed that militancy alone will not secure victory for the striking miners. The 2,400 strikers are fighting a war on two fronts: one against the ruthless company, and the other against the USW, which is determined to sell out the strike and ram through a concessions contract so as to protect its close ties with the corporation.

If the company felt emboldened to present such a provocative contract offer, it is because Vale knows full well that the USW is working night and day to isolate the striking miners’ struggle, while providing minimal strike pay. The well-paid Steelworker bureaucrats have already managed to ram through

a rotten concessions contract akin to that rejected by the Sudbury workers at Vale’s Port Colborne location, materially weakening the Sudbury miners’ strike. In their efforts to straitjacket the Sudbury strike, the USW bureaucrats are supported by the New Democratic Party. During a photo-op tour of the picket line, local NDP MPP Jamie West cynically declared that he “supported” the strike before going on to claim that Vale workers enjoy “good contracts and good jobs.”

Strikers should review how the USW sold out the strike of 2,500 ArcelorMittal workers in northeastern Quebec earlier this month. After the workers defied the union’s recommendation to back a concessions-filled contract, the USW made a public show of adapting to the workers’ militancy. When the company, an iron mining and steelmaking transnational giant, made a second offer patterned on the first, the USW called for it to be voted down and launched the strike.

But after four weeks on the picket line, the USW, to the delight of Quebec’s right-wing CAQ government, concluded a rotten four-year agreement with ArcelorMittal. It includes various bonuses—bonuses that the company can easily afford to pay since iron prices are at record levels—and pay increases more or less equal to the current inflation rate. A series of contentious issues were shunted off to a corporatist company-USW working group, which will work behind the scenes to impose management’s diktats.

There is an alternative to the USW’s ruinous strategy. The striking Vale workers are part of a global upsurge of working-class opposition to the insatiable drive of the corporations to boost profits. This explosive growth in the class struggle finds expression in strikes by miners on Vancouver Island, in Alabama, in Colombia, Peru and Chile. At Volvo’s New River Valley plant in Virginia, striking autoworkers have seized the initiative by forming a rank-and-file committee to provide leadership to an insurgency against the United Auto Workers’ (UAW) efforts to foist a pro-company agreement on them.

Mineworkers in Sudbury and their supporters can break out of the USW-imposed isolation by fighting to unify the Vale strike with workers in struggle across Canada, the United States, and internationally. To do this, strikers must establish a rank-and-file strike committee independent of the USW. Striking Vale miners should join in the building of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). It has been established to coordinate workers’ struggles across state borders and continents against transnational corporations like Vale, which scour the globe for the cheapest labour and biggest profits, and infuse these struggles with a socialist internationalist program.



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