

A response to a Vale Sudbury striker: USW doubles down on contract vote recommendation lie

Carl Bronski, Roger Jordan
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The strike by 2,450 Vale miners in Sudbury, Ontario entered its sixth week Tuesday. The strikers are resisting demands by the multi-billion dollar conglomerate for real-term pay cuts, the gutting of health care and retirement benefits, and the further entrenching of a hated multi-tier wage/benefit grid.

In a comment on a recent *World Socialist Web Site* article (Top Vale executive threatens 2,450 striking miners in Northern Ontario) that outlined the company's attempt to extort sweeping contract concessions at Vale's giant base metals mine, mill and smelter complex in Sudbury, a striking miner, Bruce, wrote the following:

"So this article is very well written, but the author has one thing wrong. I am a member on 6500 striking for our rights....The union only endorsed the first contract because Vale negotiators pushed them to bring it to us. If they didn't, they would've not given us any contract offer and would've left...So they did what Vale wanted and we turned the offer down. There is no reason to have a contract with concessions in a time where they are making billions—not to mention Vale took 67 million from the government of Canada for COVID relief!!!! Time to share the wealth!"

In discussions with other striking miners, WSWS reporters have been told on several occasions that USW Local 6500 officials have made similar arguments to them and their co-workers in an attempt to explain away the bargaining committee's unanimous endorsement of the miserable concessions-filled tentative agreement they reached with Vale. As it happened, workers showed they could recognize a rotten sellout when they saw one, and roundly voted down the proposed contract.

Stunned by the rejection of the tentative settlement and fearing that their open endorsement of Vale management's concession demands would compromise their position with the rank-and-file at the very outset of a bitter dispute, USW officials began the strike by resorting to various versions of a bald-faced lie. The bargaining committee had no choice, they pleaded. We had to do it or Vale would have ordered a lockout, they complained. We were legally bound to recommend the contract or, as our reader Bruce was told, "The union only endorsed the first contract because Vale negotiators pushed them to bring it to us. If they didn't they would not have given us any contract and would've left."

The fact of the matter is that even within the framework of the anti-worker collective bargaining system to which the trade unions subordinate every workers' struggle, there was absolutely nothing

to prevent the bargaining committee from presenting the company's concessionary offer to the membership, outlining its blackmail threats, and recommending a massive "No" vote. Indeed, this was its elementary duty.

In recent years, union officials have frequently put concessionary management offers to votes "without recommendation," hoping thereby to evade responsibility for their acquiescence to the bosses and outright refusal to mount a working class counter-offensive. However, the USW bureaucrats did not resort to such a maneuver. They were so determined to push through management's concession demands, they threw the union's entire weight behind browbeating workers into accepting them. One consequence of this is that they managed to prevail on the Port Colborne workers to accepting the concessions-filled contract, thereby undermining and isolating the Sudbury miners' struggle from the outset.

The glaring take-away from this entire sordid episode is that union officials thought that if the deal was so good for management—and it certainly was—then it must surely be good for the workers. This pathetic corporatist outlook flows from the USW's loyalty to the capitalist system—its insistence that workers' livelihoods and lives must be subordinated to investor profit.

Vale management has thus been given a free hand to continue to try to bully and blackmail the strikers, threatening them and the entire community that it will starve its Sudbury operations of future investments and relocate nickel production elsewhere in its vast global empire, if workers do not surrender.

It is hardly novel for corporate managers, whether at Vale or any other company, to use such tactics to extort concessions. Threats of plant and mine closures, investment cutbacks, and the outsourcing of production to other countries have featured in just about every bargaining round in auto, steel, and other basic industries over the past 40 years. The unions, from the United Auto Workers and Unifor in the auto industry to the USW in steel, mining and other industries, have proven totally incapable of resisting these attacks. This is due to their pro-capitalist and nationalist orientation, which has rendered them impotent in the face of globally mobile corporations.

While workers have suffered unrelenting attacks, the bureaucrats who staff the unions have sought to protect their privileged position by renouncing any association with traditions of militant working class struggle and acting evermore openly as junior

partners of management and the state.

Workers constitute an immense social power as their labour creates all society's wealth, and they can wield that power in so far as they refuse to accept that their basic needs must be subordinated to investor profit and adopt a global strategy, based on uniting their struggles across national borders and continents.

Upon receiving Vale management's miserable offer of further massive rollbacks while the company is making billions in profits, a genuine workers' organization would have publicized and denounced its contents in statements and at meetings, and campaigned for a no vote. To defeat Vale's intimidation campaign, it would have immediately appealed for other workers in the local community, across Canada, and internationally for a unified struggle against all speed-up, job-cutting, multi-tier pay scales, pension cuts and other concessions. It would have countered Vale's use of its vast financial resources and operations in well over a dozen countries to intimidate workers with the threat of the destruction of their livelihoods, by appealing to all Vale workers to bring the multinational's global operations to a grinding halt. This is the only way to force the corporation to its knees and secure the strikers' legitimate demands for better pay, workplace benefits, and job security.

Sudbury miners are in a powerful position to spearhead such an international fight. Nickel is a key commodity in Vale's operations due to the rapidly expanding market for batteries and electric vehicles. This has been underscored by a substantial rise in the price of nickel on the global market due in part to the Sudbury work stoppage.

Moreover, strikers at Vale are waging their struggle amid a rebellion by broad sections of workers against the gang up of corporate management and their trade union junior partners. As the Vale workers took to the picket line on June 1, USW members were striking in northeastern Quebec at ArcelorMittal, and at Allegheny Technologies steel mills across six US states against similar concessionary demands. At the New River Valley assembly plant in Dublin, Virginia, 3,000 Volvo Trucks workers walked off the job the same week as the Vale strike began. They had previously formed the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee to fight the United Auto Workers' effort, in line with the USW at Vale, to impose two concessions-laden contracts. In the intervening month, the VWRFC has, with the assistance of the *World Socialist Web Site*, broken the UAW's deliberate isolation of the Volvo workers' strike by campaigning among autoworkers and other industrial workers across the United States, in Canada, and internationally.

Under these conditions, there is absolutely no reason why the Vale strike must be isolated and confined to the USW issuing subservient appeals to Vale's ruthless corporate executives to "return to the bargaining table." This is a direct product of the union's determined efforts from the outset to sabotage the miners' strike. Although the union possesses hundreds of millions of dollars in assets, it is starving the strikers on a meagre \$370 (about \$US300) in strike pay per week. It must be clearly stated that if the USW is allowed to continue with this strategy, the courageous and militant stand taken by Vale strikers will go down to defeat.

The first step to prevent this outcome is for Vale workers to

immediately elect a rank-and-file strike committee able to act independently of the USW and in opposition to its pro-company agenda. The strike committee should start from what workers actually need, not what Vale and the USW claim the company can afford. Workers 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, the abolition of multi-tier wages and benefits, and the reinstatement of the defined-benefit pension program for all workers and retirees.

Strike pay must be significantly increased from the piddling sum now being dispensed.

Above all, the committee should forge links with striking miners, industrial workers, and Vale employees at other locations on the basis of workers' own class interests, which are irreconcilably opposed to Vale's ruthless drive to boost corporate profits. Should Vale institute a scabbing operation, calls for increased job actions across the trans-national company must be intensified, including at its Canadian operations at Voisey's Bay, Newfoundland, Thompson, Manitoba and Port Colborne.

We very much agree with the striker Bruce's comment that the wealth be shared—indeed, it should be controlled by those who produce it, that is the workers themselves. But this is a revolutionary question. Workers will not share the wealth by begging to the bosses or relying on the pro-company stooges in the USW bureaucracy, but only by mobilizing the full social power of the international working class in opposition to Vale's global drive for corporate profits.



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