

USW keeping Sudbury strikers in the dark as it resumes bargaining with Vale

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As 2,450 workers at the Vale mining complex in Sudbury, Ontario near the end of their second month of strike action against the transnational company's concessions demands, the United Steelworkers (USW) has resumed closed-door negotiations with management. Thus far, the union has refused point blank to say anything of substance about its talks with Vale, including making any commitment to oppose further givebacks.

The strike at what was the centre of the Inco nickel-mining empire until Vale bought it in 2006 erupted on June 1, after workers decisively repudiated a USW-blessed, concessions-filled tentative contract agreement.

Union and company negotiators returned to the bargaining table July 19 after jointly selecting Charlie Sheppard to facilitate the talks. Sheppard, who has played this role in previous Steelworker-Vale negotiations, will be acting as a consultant, not a government-appointed mediator/arbitrator. Any recommendations he makes will be non-binding.

In light of the USW's disgraceful sabotage of the struggle of the Allegheny Technologies steelworkers, who waged a determined three-month strike across five US states, there can be little doubt that the Steelworker bureaucrats are plotting with management to cook up another tentative agreement that will give Vale most everything it wants.

The members of the USW Local 6500 bargaining committee have already proven that they are bought-and-paid-for stooges of the company by unanimously recommending a tentative contract that would have slashed pension and health benefits, and imposed real-terms (after inflation) pay cuts. Moreover, they have continued to staunchly defend their actions by circulating the brazen lie that they had no choice but to accept Vale demands and package them as a tentative contract.

Their real aim, then as now, is to further consolidate and expand their corrupt corporatist relationship with Vale. Voicing the true sentiments of the Steelworker officialdom, Jamie West—a former Local 6500 official and Sudbury District Labour Council President who now serves as the NDP Member of the Provincial Parliament for Sudbury—said

the late-May deal “wasn't necessarily a bad one.”

The workers had other ideas, voting down the union-endorsed agreement by a massive 70 percent margin. However, the USW's unanimous recommendation had the effect of convincing workers at Vale's Port Colborne facility to ratify the deal, further isolating the Sudbury workers and materially weakening their strike.

The USW bureaucracy, exposed by its support for the sell-out tentative agreement and sensing the anger amongst the membership, then abruptly changed tack and called for rejection of virtually the same deal in a second vote, held 10 days into the strike.

This record demonstrates that the Sudbury miners, who have a long tradition of militant class struggle, are waging a war on two fronts. On the one hand, they are pitted against the rapacious demands of Vale and its multi-millionaire shareholders. On the other, they are up against the pro-corporate USW. It is starving workers with poverty-level strike pay; keeping them entirely in the dark about the negotiations, including what worker demands, if any, it is prioritizing; and deliberately isolating the strike.

Vale management has made clear that its goal is a massive reduction in labour costs so as to make its Sudbury nickel, copper, cobalt and precious metal mining operation globally “competitive.” At a Vale virtual town hall held last month, Dino Otranto, chief operating officer for the Brazilian transnational's North Atlantic operations and Asian refineries, sought to blackmail the striking miners by boasting that Vale has the means to weather a long strike. He denounced the Sudbury workers as being responsible for the “highest labour costs” in the company's global operations and warned that future investments would “dry up” if sweeping concessions are not accepted. In truth, the profitable nickel market, for which Sudbury is a key supplier, is contributing to lavish payouts for Vale shareholders and hefty company-wide profits.

As the result of the defeat of a year-long strike in 2009–2010, which the USW isolated and strangled as the company mounted a major scabbing operation, the Sudbury

miners have already been forced to accept massive concessions. These included: the ending of defined-benefit pensions for new-hires; the contracting-out of more jobs to lower-wage, non-union suppliers; and a strict cap on the popular nickel bonus, which rewarded workers with additional pay when ore prices rose above a specified level. Since the year-long strike a decade ago, Vale has eliminated about 800 jobs at its Sudbury operations.

Strikers in contact with *World Socialist Web Site* reporters said that they are gearing up for a long battle. “I have a feeling Vale wants us out for a while yet to benefit their own agenda...to negotiate a better contract for their owners! I believe the Company will not take the concessions off the table and we will be out on strike until September or October, possibly longer,” said one worker.

Another striker added, “It feels as though we’ll either be on strike for another year, or it’ll be over when the company wants it to be over. Some are saying in autumn, as this would allow the company to null and void contracts they currently have.”

The USW, which sits atop assets valued at \$1.5 billion, is paying Vale strikers earning the company’s base wage the measly sum of \$370 per week (about US\$300) in strike pay—substantially less than they would make on unemployment insurance.

This is a deliberate policy, aimed at softening up and demoralizing the strikers so that ultimately they have no other option but to accept whatever rotten agreement Vale and the USW devise. As one striking worker told the WSWS, “Lots (of strikers) are working on the side for wages slightly above minimum wage to make do.”

Striking Vale workers should reject the fatalistic conception that the company has a free hand to dictate how long the strike lasts and on what terms it ends. There is no legitimate reason why strikers should be isolated for months on the picket line while receiving strike-pay rations.

The Vale strikers are waging a courageous struggle under conditions where thousands of workers across Canada, the United States, and other countries are engaged in strikes and job actions to reverse or oppose further concessions and defend their rights. At Rio Tinto’s aluminum smelter in Kitimat, British Columbia, 900 steelworkers represented by Unifor walked off the job last weekend to protest the growth of contract labour and attacks on their pension rights. In northeastern Quebec, 2,500 USW members recently struck the global steel giant ArcelorMittal for close to a month. On Tuesday, manufacturing workers at a Bombardier and De Havilland aerospace plant in Toronto represented by Unifor walked off the job to secure greater job security and protest the gutting of workplace rights and retiree benefits.

In each of these struggles, workers are fighting over like

issues and confront similar enemies. Globally mobile corporations that have forced workers to work in unsafe conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic are seizing on its economic fallout to ratchet up worker-exploitation so as to boost executive pay, shareholder payouts, and corporate profits. However, the pro-capitalist unions, be it the USW, Unifor, or the UAW in the United States, are systematically quarantining workers’ struggles, dividing them one from the other, while promoting various big business politicians, including Prime Minister Trudeau in Canada and US President Joe Biden, as “worker-friendly,” thus laying the basis for their defeat.

To break out of the union-imposed isolation, Vale strikers urgently require their own fighting organization that can take action independently of the USW to oppose all concessions, speed-up and job cuts, and fight to unite Sudbury workers with striking Rio Tinto miners in BC, aircraft workers in Ontario, and industrial and other workers across Canada and the United States. Vale workers should immediately form a rank-and-file strike committee led by the most trusted and militant workers to take the conduct of their struggle out of the hands of the USW bureaucracy.

Such a committee would insist that the USW pay workers 100 percent of their regular wages throughout the strike, so as to send a clear message to Vale management that the workers are prepared for serious struggle. It would also issue a special appeal to Vale employees in Brazil, Indonesia, and dozens of other countries to take solidarity strike action in order to bring the mining conglomerate to its knees and force it to accept workers’ demands.

These demands must be based on what workers actually need, not what Vale executives and their USW lackeys claim is “affordable.” They should include a significant wage increase to make up for all the concessions-filled contracts of recent years, an end to the multi-tier wage-benefit system, full health care coverage for all paid for by Vale and defined-benefit pension plans for all workers. By fighting for such a program, Vale workers can make their strike the starting point of a mass mobilization of the working class across Canada and internationally in opposition to the austerity and givebacks dictated by the corporations, and for decent-paying, secure jobs for all.



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