

Anger erupts after worker killed in horrific accident at National Steel Car in Hamilton, Ontario, third plant death in two years

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Do you work for National Steel Car? We want to hear from you. Contact the WSWs here to discuss safety issues at the plant or fill out the form below for assistance in forming a rank-and-file safety committee.

A 51-year-old worker was killed in a horrific workplace accident at National Steel Car's plant in Hamilton, Ontario, at approximately 7:50 p.m. on Monday, June 6 sparking an outpouring of anger from his co-workers which has forced the company to cancel production this week.

Details remain sparse, but initial reports indicate that Quoc Le was crushed by a railcar bulkhead. He leaves behind a spouse and one child. A GoFundMe has been started by his co-workers to raise funds for his bereaved widow and child.

Le is the third worker to die at the facility in less than two years. Collin Grayley, a 35-year-old painter, died on the job on April 23, 2021. Eight months prior to that on September 2, 2020, Fraser Cowan, a 51-year-old crane operator, lost his life. Grayley had been looking forward to spending time with his children Emma, Robert and Joseph during last spring's COVID-19 shutdown. Cowan, an avid amateur musician and supporter of the local music charity the Hamilton Music Collective, is survived by his children, Ellison and Aimee and ex-wife Trudy.

Workers at the plant are outraged over Le's death. More than 60 workers assembled at the gates of the plant on Thursday, chanting, "No more deaths!" Workers are livid at being treated like disposable commodities. One thing that is undeniably clear after the three deaths at National Steel Car in less than two years—and after the two and a half years of the COVID-19 pandemic—corporations prioritize their profitability over workers' health and lives.

Commenting on the deaths of the three workers, a worker at National Steel Car told the WSWs, "The three people killed all have something in common ... safety devices failing. In September of '20, Fraser Cowan was killed by a safety device coming off his hook because there was no safety latch to hold it on. The second, in April of '21 was killed on the last night before we all got sent home (because COVID infections were out of control). [Collin Grayley] was crushed when a manlift extended and pinned him against something. This used to be a two-person job and (allegedly) the safety lockout devices on the machine had been disabled."

National Steel Car is the largest manufacturer of railway rolling stock in Canada. Its customers include the largest and most profitable railway conglomerates in North America, such as Canadian National, Canadian Pacific and BNSF. Revenue in 2021 was estimated to be \$543 million. The Hamilton factory employs 1,400 USW union members in addition to 600 non-unionized workers in an exploitative two-tier system.

The current CEO, Greg Aziz, purchased the company from Dofasco in 1994 and increased production from 3,500 to 12,000 rail cars per year, while slashing the workforce from 3,000 workers in 2000 and as many as 2,400 in 2006 to around 2,000 today.

The piecework and bonus payment systems in place at National Steel Car contribute to the dismal health and safety record, as they are designed to force workers to speed up production to dangerous levels.

Hoping to dissipate the anger among the workforce, the company initially cancelled workers' shifts on Tuesday and Wednesday. Publicly available information suggests that they had every intention of resuming the usual gruelling work schedule on June 8. This scenario, however, was disrupted by Thursday's protest and the anger among the rank-and-file.

The outpouring of rage from workers so frightened the company bosses that they issued a public statement, in which they sought to justify extending the plant's closure—a transparent attempt to dissipate workers' anger and stop them from discussing how to put an end to unsafe working conditions—as a health and safety measure!

Addressing its employees as "valued team members," the company stated on its Facebook page, "We have been made aware of a planned protest this afternoon at our main entrance that will impede the safe entry and exit of our facility. Our top priority remains the health and safety of our people, customers, suppliers and partners. Out of an abundance of caution, we have decided to temporarily suspend our manufacturing operations today and tomorrow. We are planning to resume operations next week."

The National Steel Car worker told the WSWs that the USW "called for a protest in the parking lot today, Thursday, June 9, basically to blow off steam and talk about the Westray Mine law." The Westray Bill, passed in 2004, is named after the 1992 Westray Mine disaster in Nova Scotia, which claimed the lives of 26

miners. It makes it legally possible to hold management criminally responsible for workplace accidents that are the result of company negligence. No one has ever been convicted under it and the legislation is largely symbolic.

Reviews of the Hamilton plant online give an indication of management's complete disregard for the well-being and lives of workers. Several reviews on Google noted that training was unpaid and that the place felt "like a sinking ship." Another reviewer said, "Worked there as a welder, no previous experience welding, they hired me as a welder trainee. Put me through a 2 week in house training course (unpaid). As soon as I started I realized the training provided was not enough to meet expectations. I was put in turnover, one of the hardest jobs in the place fresh out of school. I had to weld the inside of train cars, everyone else doing my job had been there for 5+ years and had no patience to teach. I asked for an easier position to improve my welding but they told me I couldn't switch until I had 1 year seniority."

Another review on Indeed noted, "Safety definitely isn't a priority at National Steel Car and you will be maliciously targeted if you try to come forward or refuse unsafe work. If you speak out about anything the head of HR will force your supervision to move you to a different position where you definitely can't make piece work, effectively making you lose hundreds of dollars every week. ... If you value your life, time, and mental health I would avoid National Steel Car at all costs."

Frank Crowder, president of USW Local 7135, which has 1,400 members at the plant, told CBC News, "Our members are not just angry, but they're fearful. ... I'm receiving many calls from members who are looking for other employment because they believe it's too dangerous. Their families, their wives, are asking them not to go back there, to please find other jobs and work somewhere else."

Underscoring the seething anger among workers at the plant, the USW has felt compelled to call for a criminal investigation into the company. This demand is aimed both at containing the workers' outrage in official pro-employer channels and to cover up the union's complicity in enforcing dangerous working conditions at National Steel Car.

When workers launched a strike at the plant for improved health and safety conditions in 2009, the USW worked might and main to shut it down. After workers decisively rejected a sellout contract by 67 percent, the USW pushed through a similar deal that gutted seniority rights and embedded a two-tier wage system at the plant. Currently, hourly wages at the factory vary between \$19 and \$27, depending on the position, according to data from Indeed.

One review on Indeed sums up the relationship between the company and the union on the one hand and the workers on the other: "Awful management and even worse Union. No one is behind you as an employee, you are just a number there. Hence all the deaths due to safety that they do nothing about."

National Steel Car has refused to comment directly on Le's death. The company is currently facing charges over the deaths of Grayley and Cowan under the Ontario Occupation Health and Safety Act (OHSA). Underscoring the contempt with which the company views the lives of its workers, National Steel Car, via its lawyers, has said that it will "vigorously defend" itself against the

charges and that the railcar factory "has been and continues to be a safe workplace."

The provincial Ministry of Labour, Training, and Skills Development (MLTSD) has reportedly begun an investigation into Le's death. Under Ontario's business-friendly labour laws, the MLTSD is legally required to investigate workplace deaths. However, convictions are rare and the punishment is limited to a fine.

The plant has a history of safety violations resulting in tragic, but entirely preventable deaths, that long predates the events of the past two years. Just six months prior to the 2009 strike, the company was fined \$250,000 for the death of one worker and, in a separate incident, the serious injury of another. The fines were issued to the company for failing to comply with the OHSA. Fines, however, are a part of doing business and they have done nothing to change National Steel Car's behaviour.

The issues at National Steel Car are part of a broader crisis affecting workers across Canada and around the world. On average, three workers in Canada die on the job every day for a total of roughly 1,000 workers every year. According to the UN's International Labour Organization, 6,000 workers die on the job every day and 2.3 million die every year.

The USW and the trade union bureaucracy as a whole have no intention of challenging these brutal conditions of exploitation. On top of their complicity in enforcing deadly work conditions across Canada's industrial and manufacturing sectors, the unions fully endorsed the Trudeau Liberal government's back-to-work/back-to-school campaign during the pandemic, which led to the sacrifice of tens of thousands of lives to protect corporate profits.

The defence of the right to life and a safe workplace are incompatible with the capitalist system. Workers must form rank-and-file committees, independent of the union apparatus, to put forward a programme that fights for placing human need, including the very protection of workers' lives on the job, above private profit.



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