

Safety concerns persist at National Steel Car's Hamilton, Ontario, plant in aftermath of three tragic deaths

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Do you work at National Steel Car? Contact us to let us know about conditions in the plant and help build a rank-and-file committee.

The approximately 1,200 workers at the National Steel Car plant in Hamilton, Ontario are still reeling in the aftermath of the death of a co-worker in early June. Quoc Le, a 51-year-old welder, was crushed to death by a bulkhead in a horrific accident June 6.

The freight car manufacturing plant has been the site of three workplace deaths, including Le, over the course of the past year and a half. Lax safety standards and the rapacious pursuit of profit at all costs have resulted in the plant becoming one of the most unsafe workplaces in Ontario.

National Steel Car has been able to endanger workers' lives with the full complicity of successive provincial governments. The Ontario Ministry of Labour inspected the plant at least 221 times between June 1, 2017 and June 9, 2022. Remarkably, 75 of these visits occurred between June 3, 2021, and June 3, 2022. The ministry issued 78 orders against the company during this period. While the Ministry of Labour is tight-lipped about how National Steel Car compares with other workplaces in Ontario in this respect, United Steelworkers (USW) Local 7135 says that inspectors have told them that there are more incidents there than any other facility in the area.

The WSWs recently interviewed a worker at the plant, who asked to remain anonymous due to fear of company reprisals. Commenting on Le's death, the worker said, "As far as the Ministry of Labour orders go, the company has a right to appeal any order they deem as 'onerous.'

"After Mr. Le's incident, I observed supervisors and line foreman making sure all the safety procedures that were supposed to be taken, were actually being taken.

This is basically an admission of a lackadaisical approach to safety."

National Steel Car is a multi-million-dollar company and the largest manufacturer of rail freight cars in Canada. Its clients include many of North America's class I railroads, such as Canadian Pacific, Canadian National, BNSF and Norfolk Southern.

Management views paying a pittance in fines to the provincial government as more cost effective than training workers in the proper safety procedures and providing them with high-quality equipment to do their job properly. Commenting on a recent union safety meeting, the worker reported, "The union safety coordinator basically admitted that the company 'buys cheap shit' and this is part of the problem." Furthermore, supply-chain issues have exacerbated the procurement of replacement equipment. "The ability to acquire replacement equipment is also being hampered by so many companies being put on allocation because of scarcity since reopening everything after the pandemic," the worker said.

The worker reported that during early July, Ministry of Labour inspectors descended on the plant and issued on-the-spot fines to rank-and-file workers deemed guilty of minor safety infractions. The USW did nothing to protest this outrage, which is all the more egregious given the fact that nothing meaningful has been done to curb the dangerous conditions the workers find themselves in due to NSC's reckless profit-making.

Noting that all three deaths over the past 18 months in the plant occurred on the afternoon shift, the worker added that management "promoted a line foreman to afternoon shift general foreman ... they need someone here during the working hours to be in charge of the whole plant."

There can be no question that the working conditions are atrocious at National Steel Car. Opposition within the plant, however, has been carefully channeled and contained. The union limited itself to a brief demonstration outside the plant following Le's death in early June. Workers who joined in chanted, "No more deaths!" In a move that betrays the company's callous disregard to the lives of its employees, management condemned the limited union-sponsored protest on the grounds that a protest against unsafe conditions would be ... unsafe!

Underscoring the climate of fear that the company has created at the plant, the worker told the WSWS that the union local president, Frank Crowder, is no longer permitted access to company grounds. The president is "not allowed on the property because his comments to the press 'defamed the company,'" according to the worker. The worker told us that the company "demanded he make a statement to the press walking back what he said and he told them 'to go fuck themselves.' The word is that he's going to be charged civilly for this and probably fired."

The principal concerns of the USW bureaucracy have been to block any independent worker opposition to the life-threatening conditions in the plant and confine their token protests to the pro-employer "labour relations" system, which is rigged in favour of management.

Myles Sullivan, the USW District 6 supervisor for Ontario and the Atlantic provinces, has written two letters to Monte McNaughton, the Minister of Labour, since the June 6 death of Le. In a letter dated June 7, Sullivan wrote that "the ministry must acknowledge that there is a culture at this worksite that puts production and profits far above the basic rights of workers to go to work without getting killed or injured. USW members are paying dearly for the potentially criminal negligence of management at National Steel Car and for the inaction of the Ministry of Labour." Yet all the USW could offer was a pathetic appeal for a meeting with McNaughton, the very same man who oversees the Labour Ministry, which had visited the plant on 75 separate occasions over the preceding 12 months with no tangible results.

The same position was taken by the USW after the death of Colin Grayley at the plant on April 23, 2021. In a statement in May of 2021, USW National Director Ken Neumann said, "The province's Attorney-general must direct law enforcement and Crown prosecutors to do more to ensure justice."

The USW, along with three Hamilton area New Democratic Party (NDP) MPPs, have focused on invoking

the federal Westray Law as a potential means of holding NSC criminally liable for the deaths of workers. Only nine employers have been convicted under the workplace health and safety law, despite the fact that it has been on the books for nearly 20 years and more than 1,000 workers die on the job in Canada every year.

The USW routinely boasts in its publicity material about having over a million active and retired members across North America, including over 200,000 in Canada. However, the last thing the bureaucracy wants is a unified struggle of the membership for safe working conditions, which is why they have kept hundreds of thousands of USW members totally in the dark about the horrendous conditions at National Steel Car's Hamilton plant.

Years of the union bureaucracy's deference to the company has left workers feeling disenfranchised. Offering his view of the relationship between the workers and the union that nominally represents them, the worker said he has "little faith in them [the Local, the USW District 6, the NDP MPPs] actually doing anything."

If workers are to combat their barbarous treatment at the hands of National Steel Car, they need organizations to mobilize the full social power of the working class in struggle against the deadly conditions at industrial worksites across Canada. Rank-and-file workers must take the fight for a safe workplace out of the hands of the letter writers in the USW, who prioritize maintaining their partnerships with the bosses and government ministers over the health and well-being of working people. Only by taking action independent of the union bureaucracy by organizing a workplace rank-and-file committee dedicated to spearheading a mass mobilization of industrial workers for safe workplaces can workers finally ensure that there will be no more deaths at National Steel Car.



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