

“He wasn’t supposed to be on that job, but they moved him”:

Canadian steelworker speaks out about spate of workplace deaths at National Steel Car

Dylan Lubao
23 October 2022

National Steel Car (NSC) is the largest manufacturer of railway rolling stock in Canada, with annual revenues of hundreds of millions of dollars. Its manufacturing plant in Hamilton, Ontario is a death trap for the close to 1,500 workers who labour there. Over the past two years, three workers have died on the job due to accidents that were entirely preventable. The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke to a worker at the plant about the horrendous working conditions and how workers can fight back.

The worker requested anonymity prior to giving the interview. We encourage National Steel Car workers wishing to share their experiences at the plant and discuss the way forward in the struggle against the brutal working conditions presided over by management and their partners in the United Steelworkers (USW) bureaucracy to **write to NSCRFC@gmail.com**.

This past June, 51-year-old welder Quoc Le was killed in a horrific workplace accident, the third fatality at the facility in less than three years. NSC executives and owner Greg Aziz have served no jail time for these deaths or even been the subject of a criminal investigation, and the United Steelworkers has for decades failed to seriously challenge the deadly working conditions NSC workers are subject to.

The worker, who was in the plant when Le died, told us what it was like to hear the news: “I wasn’t on that line, but I was in the lunchroom with some coworkers. One of them gets a call from two guys who are on Le’s line—there’s been an accident, and someone’s dead. I shouted, ‘The third one?’ Other guys took off running towards the accident because this has happened before.

“It was pouring rain that night. It was about 8:30 in the evening. We go running down the other side of the plant. By that time the cops and the ambulance are already there. I never actually saw it.

“So afterwards, they all came back. One coworker actually saw Quoc Le get crushed. They tried to lever the bulkhead off, but they couldn’t do anything. He was dead anyway.”

According to the worker, Le’s death, like many that came before, was completely preventable. It was the by-product of relentless speedup, a negligent safety culture, and indifference on the part of the union bureaucracy. In this case, faulty crane equipment is the suspected immediate cause of the incident.

“The biggest problem that night was, as usual, they had a couple of call-ins,” he continued. “Le, I think, wasn’t supposed to be on that job, but they moved him. They were behind at lunch, so they’re rushing to get things done.

“If they get no-shows, they just try to find a warm body. I know this because it has happened to me a lot. I don’t want to blame the guy, but I don’t think he should have ever been up there in the first place. He was not regularly on that job.

“I’ve done that job. I know how to put on a bulkhead. The chains were

rated for seven tons. The piece weighed two. They didn’t lift up the entire car. They put just enough tension on the end so they could level it. Then the guy has gotta go up there, and they usually use the chain as a failsafe. So, he goes up there, he tack welds the bulkhead, then he comes back down.

“Somehow a component attached to the crane hook broke while he was up there. He never saw it coming. It fell over on him before he could even tack it properly. Something else funny is going on there because that shouldn’t have happened.”

The worker described Quoc Le from accounts given by those who knew him. “All the three guys who died, I knew of, but not personally,” he said. “Le was on the opposite shift. I recognized him but didn’t know him personally.

“Apparently, he had a side business. He worked here before that. He fixed phones and stuff, but his business didn’t do well, so he had to come back. But he would help people. They’d come to him with issues with their phones and he’d help them out. For a minimal fee, not as expensive as you’d get somewhere else. He was a really nice guy. Two kids.”

NSC: An industrial slaughterhouse

As a veteran employee of NSC, the worker told the WSWs that he, like many of his colleagues, has seen his share of tragedy and suffering at the plant.

In September 2020, Fraser Cowan, a crane operator, was killed on the job. Just seven months later in April 2021, painter Collin Grayley died. The company was slapped with meager fines and pledging each time to make the workplace safer. So frequent are the fatalities that workers have dubbed the company “National Coffin” and “National Death Car.”

“I know how Fraser was killed, because one of the guys I know was there watching the whole thing happen,” the worker explained. “It was pretty gruesome. All industrial cranes should have a safety hook. Fraser went to move something, and by accident he lowered the crane with the remote. The crane went down, unhooked itself, because there was no latch on it, and this thing fell on him. It’s 700 pounds and it fell on him and squished him.

“Only in the last five months have they put something in place for that, but it’s way too late to save Fraser. Apparently, they had orders from the Ministry of Labour to do something about the cranes before, and they never did.

“In Grayley’s case, I can’t talk about it other than rumours that I’ve heard. He was on a Skyjack. It used to be a two-man job. He had some health issues, but he was there alone, passed out with his hand on the lever, and it just kept going up. If it had been a two-man job he probably would still be alive.

“Ironically, this was the last shift in April 2021 before we all got sent home again for three weeks because the COVID rates were so high.

Grayley's was the last shift out. And he was killed at around 11:30 at night."

The fatality rate at NSC is jaw-dropping, but these kinds of conditions prevail at thousands of workplaces across Canada. This includes the associated rail industry, where grueling work schedules and the gutting of rail and maintenance crews produce regular injuries and deaths.

"Here at NSC we work under a thinly disguised piecework system called 'incentives,'" explained the worker. "So, they push quantity, quantity, quantity, at the cost of safety and quality. Maybe the workers build enough to make the piecework 'incentive,' maybe they don't. But the company is counting on guys pushing themselves to the limit, doing things they wouldn't normally do.

"There's someone who was promoted to president or vice president of production five years ago. And he introduced these things called 'super lines.' So, you have a production line, but you'll double up the production, with the same manpower.

"It got so bad guys were working through their lunch just to get the piecework. Not even going to the bathroom but peeing where they worked. Quality got so bad that they had to do a bunch of field repairs because the seams were cracking. It's because you can't work like that. You burn out fast.

"When it comes to how the company just skates by the law—well, the company has the right to appeal every decision, so they hold it up for as long as they want. They just play the paperwork and legal game. They go, 'This'll cost too much money right now,' and they hold off for six months, until they finally get a government ultimatum."

Workers at NSC are routinely exhausted, injured, and on the verge of breakdown. "I worked on a line some time ago, the same one where Le was killed," the worker recalled. "It was two ten-hour shifts. Intermodal cars. They wanted nine units, three full cars, per shift. The shift was 6 in the morning to 4, and 7:30 to 5:30. The machinery was going so hard it was breaking down all the time.

"We would go, eat our lunch, run back down. Guys going like robots, and if they got 15 minutes to themselves to eat, in a ten-hour period, that was it. And the absentee rate was terrible. It was the middle of summer with all the heat. It was awful.

"There are always trips, falls, sprained ankles, high absenteeism. You can just tell guys are glassy-eyed. They're burned out. That's where the biggest mistakes happen, because they haven't got their wits about them. A lot of near misses that could have been terrible but didn't happen because someone just got out of the way in time.

"Day rate is about \$24 an hour to start. That's what you make without the piecework. If you don't make the incentive, that's about \$400 or \$500 a week you lose. But the company could pay everyone the day rate plus piecework and still be extremely profitable. But it's more profitable for them to push more cars out, and throw crumbs at the workers, than to actually pay people decent.

"Then there's the pensions. In 2012, during contract negotiations, it came out that the pension fund was wildly underfunded. It was an old-school defined-benefit plan. So basically, the Financial Services Commission of Ontario said to the owner, Greg Aziz, you're breaking the law. You can either finance this or get charged.

"Every hire since 2012 is not on the old defined-benefits plan that I and other senior workers are on, but a defined contributions plan, tied to the stock market. Basically, an RRSP (Registered Retirement Savings Plan) with high fees. Fast forward ten years. There are now more people on the new plan than the old plan."

"And Aziz is gonna go, 'Well why don't we just wind up the old plan'. The rumour is that next year, when we go to negotiate the next contract, the old plan is going away, even for us old-timers. They're talking in the union behind closed doors about how they'll push this through."

National Steel Car's owner is a financial swindler who was once

charged with defrauding a retirement fund of millions of dollars. He stands in the mold of other carpetbaggers like American billionaire Warren Buffett.

"It's very hard to find out the company's profits, because it's private," the worker explained. "I do know that in 2020, with all the time off—and we weren't running at full capacity—they made half-a-billion in revenue. The line I was on was doing five cars a day. Let's say that's 100 thousand per car, a lowball number. That's a million dollars a day revenue, five million a week."

"If we leave it up to the old union organizations, nothing's gonna change"

The worker spoke about his anger over the USW's refusal to wage any struggle to defend workplace safety against NSC's rapacious profiteering. "Miles Sullivan, the Director of USW District 6, made a big speech criticizing safety at the plant after Le's death," explained the worker. "He correctly said that NSC is putting profits ahead of workers. That's true. I expect that of the company.

"What I don't expect is an organization that is reportedly here for the working class to do little to nothing about it. Somebody like Sullivan goes almost up to saying it's the system of profit that's responsible but stops there and doesn't point that out.

"When Collin Grayley and Fraser Cowan died, the union's approach was basically, leave it up to the Ministry of Labour. Leave it up to the legal process. That we'd have to wait this out until we get something. See where that got us?

"During the last negotiations, a lot of people wanted to reduce the time spent in the 'training' or second tier. From 2,200 hours, just cut it in half. Well, the union didn't do that, they maintained that. And to rub salt into the wound, they extended the hours needed to become a union member by 80 hours. What kind of union signs a contract where you create a tier system without labeling it one, and makes it harder to join the union? I would've thought the idea for any local is you want more members, faster. But they didn't do that. Oh, but don't forget to pay your dues."

"If you look at the relationship between the union and the company, sure it looks adversarial now, because of the recent death. But in reality, both sides seem to have a similar agreement on wage increases and stuff like that. So, it seems to me that it's almost like they're not negotiating sessions, they're sellout strategy sessions, and they go, 'How can we get enough just enough to keep guys quiet, and maintain company profitability, and we'll make sure everything's going good on the floor, and you guys just run your company and we'll do it that way?'"

These are the conditions that have convinced the NSC worker of the necessity of establishing a rank-and-file committee in the plant, which will place power in the hands of workers on the shop floor. "If you're on one side of a national border, the light bulb should be going off," he commented. "You can't fight an international corporation on a national basis. It's not gonna work, because they just move. So, if you provide an organization and a forum for workers to deal with these things regardless of borders, that would be a more powerful way of organizing than just doing it the old way with, you know, my old Canadian union local that doesn't do much, and that US union local that doesn't do much.

"The unions are the worst at waving the flag and confusing workers and trying to blame people in Mexico or somewhere else. Blaming them for the problems and sellouts caused by the unions themselves! Not blaming the people who actually own the companies. Meanwhile, they push these sellout contracts to, you know, 'save jobs.'

"That's where these rank-and-file committees come in, because if we leave it up to the old organizations, nothing's gonna change. I know people get despondent about what's going on, and what's happened, and how they've been treated, but I don't think they understand their power collectively. And if they did, we could basically do something to change things.

“If we got a rank-and-file committee going at National Steel Car and got guys to realize it’s people just like them who are finally doing something and taking action over all the problems they’ve had with the union and the company before, I think it would have a huge impact.”



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact