

Seven months after workplace death, injuries continue apace at Canada's National Steel Car

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Do you work at National Steel Car? Contact us by emailing nscrfc@gmail.com or filling out the form at the end of this article to tell us about conditions at the plant and discuss building a rank-and-file committee.

Workplace safety issues continue to plague National Steel Car's plant in Hamilton, Ontario. Workers at the company, one of the largest manufacturers of rolling stock and rail parts in Canada, have continued to suffer injuries in the months following the tragic death of Quoc Le, 51, in early June 2022.

Le, a welder, was the third worker to be killed on the job at the plant in under two years. The other two workers were Fraser Cowan, 51, and Collin Grayley, 35. The dreadful conditions at the plant, where some 1,200 workers are employed, resemble an industrial slaughterhouse.

What is even more damning is that these abysmal and deadly conditions are being overseen by Ontario's Ministry of Labour. Statistics from the Ministry of Labour indicate that it visited the plant 221 times between June 2017 and June 2022—that is to say a period presided over by both the Wynne Liberal government and the hard-right Ford Progressive Conservatives. Many of these visits—75 to be exact—occurred between June 2021 and June 2022. The Ministry issued a total of 78 orders for safety violations during this period, including in the days before the tragic death of Le.

Accidents have continued apace following Le's death, despite the frequent presence of Ministry of Labour officials on the premises. One worker at the plant told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the company currently owes an approximate \$15 million in

safety-related fines.

The WSWS interviewed two workers at the plant shortly before the holiday break about their experiences and conditions in the workplace. They agreed to speak on condition of anonymity, citing fear of company and United Steelworker (USW) union reprisals.

Commenting on one of the recent accidents, one worker noted that “a crane man was injured and had to be taken out in an ambulance ... he was squished between a load and a cart that was bringing in plates.”

The worker confirmed to the WSWS that Ministry of Labour officials were present at the plant at the time of the most recent accident. Ministry officials have been conducting regular visits to the plant since the June death of Le. Documents obtained by the WSWS state that the Ministry of Labour has conducted what it calls “enhanced inspections” of the plant since July 2022. In all, a total of 248 orders were written by the Ministry. Twenty-four orders had yet to be complied with as of mid-December.

The Ministry's orders have not resolved the core issues that have made National Steel Car one of the most unsafe workplaces in Ontario. According to one of the workers, the government officials have recently become fixated on natural gas fueled heat cannons which are used to provide some heat to workers on the job. The facility is not heated, and the workers describe it as “a big concrete barn.” The second worker told the WSWS, “We suffocate in the summer, we're icicles in the winter.” The Ministry's main concern is that there are no screens in front of the heat cannons.

The real culprits for the accidents, however, are not the heat cannons.

National Steel Car employs a highly exploitative

piecework system designed to extract as much labour from the workers for as little as possible. The first worker told the WSWS that piecework is “the biggest reason people get killed. Twenty-five percent of wages are based on piece work.” The company calls this throwback to nineteenth century working conditions by a suitably Orwellian name: “incentives.”

The company employs an arcane method to arrive at piecework payments. The most recent collective agreement from June 2020 allows the workers to submit a grievance claim that would permit the union to review the company’s time study information (i.e.: how long it takes to complete a specific task) on which the piecework rates are theoretically based. However, the language in the letter bluntly states that “no other aspect of the plan will be grievable, which includes the Company’s right to set the incentive rates.”

The workers also cited other means by which the company sweats labour from them. One novel invention within the past decade is the idea of “super lines.” Since the introduction of the super lines, the workers told the WSWS, “injuries and deaths have increased. The idea of super lines—double the production, with the same manpower and not enough time.” Many of the deaths and injuries occur when workers are desperately scrambling around the plant in order to make their piecework. Machinery breaks down constantly under these demanding conditions, creating further risks.

Rumors have been circulating that job cuts could take place at the plant this year. In addition to the relentless speedup, one worker pointed out that the prep department has declined to half of what it was a few years ago. There are roughly 200 workers currently employed in the prep department. The continual cuts combined with the exploitative piecework system have contributed to conditions in which the quality of the products produced has been affected, in addition to endangering the lives of the workers.

The USW has responded to the dire conditions at the plant by doing all it can to smother the seething anger among the workers. USW Local 7135 organized a one-day protest in June after the death of Le.

Since then, USW District 6 Director Myles Sullivan has penned three letters to the provincial Progressive Conservative Minister of Labour, Monty McNaughton, begging for a meeting to discuss the health and safety

crisis at National Steel Car.

Underscoring the union’s impotence in the face of the Ford government’s deliberate stonewalling over the disastrous working conditions, Sullivan concluded one letter by writing, “Please note that my office will continue to contact your office until such point a meeting takes place and you take immediate action to address the aforementioned crisis.” The Ford government has yet to reply to the USW’s empty plea.

A real workers’ organization would have called for all of the brothers and sisters to down tools and refuse work until a rank-and-file factory committee could ensure that the necessary safety measures are implemented under the democratic supervision of the committee. However, nothing terrifies the USW more than the prospect of the workers taking the struggle into their own hands.

The complete inability and unwillingness of the USW at either the local or national levels to take up a fight in defence of the very lives of its members is bound up with its desire to preserve the incestuous corporatist alliance between the union officialdom, the company, and the state. Rank-and-file workers are completely left out of this picture—except for when it comes to paying dues.

Under these circumstances, there is only one option for workers to fight for improved conditions: a rank-and-file committee must be formed at the plant to take the struggle for health and safety out of the hands of the union bureaucrats and put the power into the hands of the workers. Such a committee could organize a struggle by the workers against the anti-worker corporatist conspiracy between company management, the provincial government, and USW officials, and appeal for support from workers throughout Ontario, across Canada, and internationally to put an end to the deadly working conditions at National Steel Car.



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