

Over 1,400 workers at Canada's National Steel Car vote by 95 percent for strike action

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Do you work at National Steel Car? Contact us by emailing nscrjc@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.

In a powerful demonstration of their determination to reverse years of wage cuts and deadly working conditions, workers at National Steel Car (NSC) in Hamilton, Ontario, have voted by nearly 95 percent to strike. The current contract for the workers, most of whom are members of the United Steelworkers (USW), expires on June 24, at which point they will be in a legal strike position.

National Steel Car is a particularly barbaric workplace. Three workers have died in as many years in gruesome workplace “accidents,” for which no executives, or the company owner, the financial swindler Greg Aziz, have been charged or convicted.

Conditions were so bad at NSC that the Ontario Ministry of Labour visited the plant 221 times in five years between June 1, 2017 and June 9, 2022, in large part to respond to accidents and worker complaints about health and safety issues. Absolutely nothing has been done to protect workers from COVID-19, which ripped through the plant in several waves.

After welder Quoc Le was killed on the job last June, the Ministry of Labour ramped up their site visits and implemented onerous band-aid fixes, scapegoating shop floor workers in the process. None of this has done anything to curb workplace injuries, which occur daily and could at any point produce another fatality.

This is because the culture of injury and death is rooted in the company's relentless pursuit of profit. The exploitative “incentive” or piecework system, which through the decades the USW has tacitly accepted, forces workers to sacrifice time, life and limb to accelerate production or forfeit an extra \$400 to \$500 per paycheck. The union has done nothing to end the notorious “super lines” set up by management, which push workers so hard they skip breaks and urinate in bottles to avoid leaving their stations.

Roughly 79 percent of the 1,440 eligible USW Local 7135

members voted, making this strike mandate the most decisive in the local's recent history. Previous contract negotiations have seen abysmal turnouts for strike votes, highlighting the deep distrust and anger felt by the rank and file toward the USW bureaucracy, represented at the plant by local President Frank Crowder.

The NSC rank and file's resolve to fight is the latest expression of a resurgent global struggle of the working class. Massive strikes and protests involving millions of workers around the world are erupting against decades of job and wage cuts by corporations, as well as brutal austerity measures enacted by capitalist governments to pay for war. Just last week, 7,200 British Columbia dockworkers voted to strike.

The union bureaucracy's role everywhere is to smother this upsurge of working class struggles. Recent major union betrayals include the sellout of American auto battery workers this month at transnational company Clarios, and the imposition of below-inflation pay “increases” on Canadian federal government workers this past spring. In the summer of 2021, the USW sold out a bitter strike of 2,400 miners at Vale in Sudbury, Ontario.

The USW is one of the largest unions in North America, boasting 1.2 million working and retired members in the United States, Canada and the Caribbean and a strike fund of more than \$850 million.

Bitter experience over the past four decades has demonstrated, however, that the bureaucracy seeks to avoid at all costs mobilizing its vast membership and resources in defence of wages, working conditions or jobs. Instead, the union apparatus works to keep striking workers isolated until they can impose the demands of corporate management and other union members in the dark about contract struggles that have a direct impact on their working conditions. An example from NSC of the consequences of these policies came in 2009, when the USW supported the introduction of a two-tier wage and pension system.

Reports from rank-and-file NSC workers indicate that the USW is preparing a sellout at NSC before the strike can

even begin. For months, the USW bureaucracy has spouted one militant slogan after another about defeating the company, but recently posted a bargaining update meekly complaining that the company had missed a number of bargaining sessions and that negotiations were now at an impasse.

The company has withdrawn from negotiations with the USW because they know the union will play its allotted role and do everything possible to avert a strike. If workers' militancy proves impossible to contain and the union is forced to call a strike, the bureaucracy will seek to starve workers out on a measly \$260 a week in strike pay so as to soften them up to accept a rotten contract.

Workers report that Crowder and the bureaucracy have hinted that they are working on a "front-loaded" contract proposal. That is, a contract with marginally higher wage increases for the first year or two, to prey upon the financial desperation of a growing number of workers, before leaving workers with pitiful "raises" for the remainder of the contract. With inflation soaring above 8 percent last year, and still sitting above 4 percent today, such a contract would amount to a significant real-terms pay cut.

If the USW bureaucrats have their way, workers may not even strike at the end of this week. Crowder has reportedly been heard saying that a strike may be postponed and the current contract extended "because some guys want to work." Underscoring that the USW is preparing to ignore the basic principle "no contract, no work," neither the local's website nor its Facebook page have updated workers about the strike vote or next steps.

The USW's hostility to organizing a genuine struggle for the workers' demands flows from its pro-corporate and nationalist politics. This is, after all, the same union that applauded the fascistic US President Donald Trump's trade war measures against China, and backed the renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement to create the basis for US and Canadian imperialism to wage war against their geostrategic rivals.

The leaders of the USW bureaucracy prioritize their "partnerships" with the US and Canadian governments, and ruthless corporate CEOs like Aziz, who care nothing for the lives, and deaths, of their workers. As a leading member of the Canadian Labour Congress, the USW is a key prop of the Trudeau Liberal government. With the backing of the trade unions and New Democrats, the Liberals are enforcing savage austerity measures on workers to pay for Canadian imperialist war abroad.

The thoroughly subservient attitude of the USW apparatus to the state and its anti-worker "collective bargaining" framework was underlined in its response to the death of Le. After workers' anger erupted, forcing the USW to call a

demonstration outside the plant, the USW sought to channel worker outrage into a fruitless appeal for NSC to be criminally prosecuted.

Miles Sullivan, the USW Ontario and Atlantic director, then politely mailed Ontario Tory Labour Minister Monte McNaughton to appeal to the big business politician to meet "at the earliest opportunity to discuss what steps can be taken ...". McNaughton, who has held his post through three deaths at NSC, ignored every one of these letters.

While Aziz and NSC management enjoy the backing of the state apparatus and invaluable assistance from the USW bureaucracy, NSC workers are in a powerful position. NSC produces rail cars that are critical for maintaining already stretched supply chains and transporting military equipment and the resources needed to wage war.

Many cars are sold to the Class I North American railroads, where over 100,000 railway workers were set to strike late last year against grueling work schedules but were prevented from doing so by the combined efforts of the union bureaucracy and Biden administration. A powerful stand taken by NSC workers would therefore galvanize support among railway workers, as well as other industrial workers labouring under similarly abysmal conditions at plants across Canada, the United States and Mexico.

To win their contract struggle, NSC workers must seize control of the strike preparations and negotiations from the union bureaucrats by establishing a rank-and-file committee. This committee should advance a series of non-negotiable demands based on what workers need, including immediate safety improvements to put an end to the horrendous casualty rate at the plant and substantial pay increases so workers no longer need to rely on piecework to make ends meet. The committee must also fight to broaden the struggle to other sections of workers as part of the development of a worker-led counteroffensive against austerity and war, and for decent-paying, secure jobs and safe working conditions for all.



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