

Reject National Steel Car’s provocative “final offer”! Build the NSC Rank-and-File Committee to lead our strike and mobilize broad working class support!

National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee

26 June 2023

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

National Steel Car’s “final” contract offer is a provocation. It is making bumper profits and has a full order book, yet it is determined to subject us to miserable wages and terrible working conditions for a further three years. The fact that the United Steelworkers’ negotiating team has refused to call for a resounding “No” vote and immediate preparations for a strike demonstrates yet again that the union bureaucracy will not fight for our interests. This is why we are forming the National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee (NSCRFC), which we urge all workers at the Hamilton plant to join and build. Contact us at: nscrfc@gmail.com

The proposed contract includes pathetic wage “increases” of 4 percent in the first year and 3 percent for the two following years. It includes no cost-of-living adjustment and no serious measures to improve the plant’s horrendous safety record. The proposed employment of two health and safety representatives is a cruel joke, since they will work in cooperation with company management to enforce a brutal workplace regime that has led to countless injuries and three deaths in as many years.

We are always told, “this is the industry standard” and “this is the best we can do” or, even worse, “this is a partnership.” After watching three of our fellow workers get killed over the past three years, it seems this is a one way “partnership” with the USW acting as the pliant accomplice of corporate management.

Against the USW bureaucracy

At the heart of the issue is the inescapable fact that the USW bureaucracy simply does not have our best interests at heart in this, or any other “negotiations” they have entered into over the last four decades. We have suffered with below inflation wage increases for years when the stated inflation rate was below 1 or 2 percent. We have newly-hired workers suffer through a USW-negotiated tier system (without it being stated) for over a decade. We have had our pensions split for over a decade. We have endured production speed up (“super lines”) while having trouble making do with subpar equipment and unsafe working conditions. While NSC has lined its pockets, the USW has stood by, apparently helpless. Again, three people have been killed at NSC over the last three years during all of this. And where was the USW apparatus? Well, they “negotiated” directly or indirectly what we face on a daily basis. For the life of us, other than bringing in the Ministry of Labour on site more often, coming up with asinine rules over drink stations, and

levying a few fines that amount to walk around money for NSC, what has really changed? The production numbers remain the same, while next to nothing has been done to address the daily threat to workers’ life and limb.

ENOUGH OF THIS!

It’s time to look the harsh realities we confront squarely in the face. We have to recognise that we are facing a two front battle in these negotiations. The obvious enemy is NSC. The other, quite frankly, is the USW bureaucracy that we pay dues to, yet seems to act less like a fighting organization of the working class and more like a cheap labour contractor. We, the workers at NSC, must break free from the shackles of the USW bureaucracy and by extension the other AFL-CIO/CLC “unions.” Only in this way can we fight for what we truly need and not what the company and the USW agree on behind our backs.

We are forming the National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee. So, what is a rank-and-file committee?

Rank and File Committees are democratic organizations run by the workers on the shop floor. Not bureaucrats in Toronto or Pittsburgh. They are necessary to carry forward the fight we are inevitably in. Through these committees, workers share information, plan communication, and link up across each shift and production line so everyone is on the same page. Critically, rank and file committees are the way workers can link together in a network that breaks down the isolation imposed by the union bureaucracies (in our case, the USW) and unleashes the full strength of the entire working class. And if there is any job action at NSC, we know the USW will isolate us and starve us out on meagre strike pay forcing many of us to take a bad deal.

What does the NSCRFC fight for?

We urge all workers to deliver a powerful “No” vote at Wednesday’s contact vote and to join the NSCRFC to ensure our strike is prosecuted by and for the rank-and-file, including by broadening the struggle against inflation driven real-wage cuts, speed-up and unsafe working conditions to other workers in Ontario, the North American rail industry and beyond.

Here are some of our demands for the things we need to live a reasonably comfortable life.

1. A 10 percent annual wage increase PLUS the immediate reinstatement of the COLA clause in our contract. By the way, the starting point should be from our “incentive” rates, NOT our day rates. This is to

begin to make up for the minimal wage increase that the USW “negotiated” and claimed was the “industry standard” for at least the last decade. This will also allow us to get above the current inflation rate as any increase below that rate is an effective pay cut and only helps NSC. We are all seeing our incomes eroded due to inflation. Undoubtedly NSC has raised the prices it charges because of inflation, but it has received cheap labour rates thanks to the USW. We want to claw some of that back!

2. The end of piecework. This is an antiquated tool of management pitting workers against each other in a race to the bottom to line the company’s pockets. It is also the main reason for people cutting corners and creating unsafe working conditions that literally kill us.

3. An immediate doubling of our health care benefit limit of \$10,000. It has been stuck at the current \$10,000 limit for too long and must change to reflect the times we are in.

4. An additional week’s vacation for workers at NSC. We all need time off from our jobs due to the physical nature of them and anyone with over a decade in this place simply deserves that extra time. Many workers simply don’t take the time currently allotted to them because they can’t afford it.

5. The end of the two-tier “Training Rate” period of 2,080 hours negotiated by the USW over a decade ago. We realize this has been temporarily suspended but it can be brought back on a whim by NSC. If the “braintrust” at NSC cannot figure out if someone has the ability to work here in 90 days (3 months) then it’s time to call this “training rate” what it really is—another form of cheap labour that allows NSC to pocket extra profits for a year. Never mind the breakdown in solidarity it creates, something we suspect was part of its purpose.

6. Rank-and-file oversight of contract negotiations, which should include live-streaming. No more secrets! No more backroom deals! This is the 21st century and we should all know what’s being discussed so that we can make an informed decision. On top of this, we need one week to look over any proposed agreement so we can see all the fine print that will affect us before we vote on it. No more of the 48 hour “cooling off” period and a snap vote on a document that will govern our work lives for the next three to five years with what amounts to a gun to our heads.

7. Rank-and-file control over health and safety in the plant! Our workplace has earned the nicknames “National Death Car” and “National Coffin” due to the high death rate and regular injuries on the job. These horrendous conditions have been created and policed jointly by company management and the USW bureaucracy. We call for workers’ control of line speeds, production targets, and all other decisions concerning health and safety. Workers should have the right to stop work immediately when a serious safety issue emerges.

Oppose Canadian nationalism! For international class unity!

We mentioned earlier the isolation the USW strives to achieve through its siloed union locals. But we are not, in fact, isolated at all from the issues that working people face all around the world. The issues we face on a daily basis at NSC are basically the same issues working class people face everywhere. Issues of falling incomes, inflation, dangerous working conditions, arduous working hours, etc. are being replicated everywhere. As people realize this, they are entering into struggle against various governments and corporations intent on maintaining the exploitative class arrangements that are the foundation of the societies we live in. A key task of our rank-and-file committee is to broaden our struggle by linking up with workers fighting similar conditions in industrial plants and other workplaces in Canada, the United States, and internationally. This

struggle is above all political, since capitalist governments enforce and preside over austerity policies and attacks on workers’ rights to pay for war and the enrichment of the financial elite.

In France, the populous is in revolt against the austerity imposed by the Macron government regarding pensions and the retirement age. The Macron government claims “there is no money” and people simply must accept this. France has unlimited cash for its military in the US-NATO instigated war with Russia and nothing for its working class citizens. The “unions” there seek an accommodation with this agenda instead of fighting against it like true working class organizations would.

In the UK, the working class is also running into an austerity agenda brought about by its government to finance its contribution to the NATO war with Russia and never-ending bailouts for the financial oligarchy. The elites there would rather have people fawn over a coronation for some goofy, buck-toothed king as a distraction, and impose austerity, than actually have one whit of concern for the economic well-being of its citizens. As for the pro-capitalist unions, they have sought to find a below inflation accommodation with the UK government to maintain the “profitability” of the Royal Post Office and remnants of the publicly owned rail transportation system off the backs of the workers they claim to represent. There is literally a revolt by the rank-and-file in these unions against the bureaucracies selling them out. You will not hear about this in the mainstream media.

In the US, the Biden administration, in cahoots with the Teamsters union, forced a pro-carrier contract down the throats of rail workers that didn’t address the main issues of safety, proper manning of crews, and an inhumane work schedule in December. Not shockingly, literally two months later, safety issues caused the derailment of a Norfolk Southern train in Ohio causing a town to turn into a toxified mess. Norfolk Southern, the same company that demanded the deal cooked up by the Biden administration and the rail unions, blamed NSC workers for another derailment in the US.

The point of what we have mentioned is that we cannot leave what we need up to the USW bureaucrats. The USW apparatus is no different than any of these other “unions” in other countries in terms of their class position. They have long since given up on any actual fight against the employers, and work with them for accommodations and “partnerships” in the profit game at the expense of rank-and-file workers like ourselves. The USW is a strident advocate of Canadian nationalism, dividing us from our class brothers and sisters across North America. It’s also a key prop of support for the pro-war, pro-austerity Trudeau Liberal government, which relies on a close partnership with the union bureaucracy to impose pro-corporate attacks on workers’ rights and conditions.

In opposition to this, we propose affiliating our rank-and-file committee to the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-file Committees. The IWA-RFC exists to unify the struggles of the working class around the world in a counter-offensive against the ruling elite’s class war agenda of imperialist war, attacks on democratic rights, and austerity. **We urge all NSC workers to contact the NSCRFC at nscrfc@gmail.com and join the committee to take forward our struggle for a safer workplace, higher wages, and secure jobs for all.**



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact