

Defying company threats and USW inaction, 1,400 National Steel Car workers walk off the job in Hamilton, Ontario

Dylan Lubao
29 June 2023

Do you work at National Steel Car? To voice your comments on the strike and/or join the National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee, which is fighting for the rank and file to take the strike's conduct out of the hands of the USW bureaucrats, email us at nscrfc@gmail.com or fill out the form at the end of this article.

Over 1,400 workers at Hamilton, Ontario railcar manufacturer National Steel Car (NSC) launched a strike at 12:01 a.m. Thursday after voting to reject the company's provocative "best and final offer." With an 80 percent turnout, 52 percent of workers voted "No." In so doing, they defied not only company management but the United Steelworkers Union (USW) bureaucracy, which has done everything in its power to block a strike and divide and demoralize the rank and file.

The strike is a courageous stand by NSC workers, who confront one of the most ruthless industrial employers in the country. Three workers have died on the job at the NSC facility in as many years, and injuries are a regular occurrence due to speedup, poor equipment and horrendous working conditions. The strike and rejection of the contract are also a direct slap in the face to the union bureaucracy, which—in a cowardly abdication of leadership and sham pretense of democracy—refused to make any recommendation on whether workers should accept or reject the company's provocative "final offer."

The aim of this treacherous stand was to isolate the workers and convince them that they had no alternative but to accept the deal. There can be no doubt that if the USW had recommended rejection and showed any resolve to fight the company's outrageous terms, there would have been a resounding "No" vote.

As things stand, the bureaucracy will seek to exploit the relatively narrow contract rejection/strike vote result to intimidate workers into believing that they face an uphill battle and must wrap up the strike as soon as possible. This will include self-serving claims that the rank and file has

dealt them "a weak hand."

In fact, the opposite is true. NSC workers are in an extremely powerful position to win their strike by securing above-inflation pay increases, an end to piecework and multitier wages, and major improvements to safety at the plant.

NSC has full order books and has been raking in massive profits. A determined strike by the workers, oriented to broadening the struggle to other industrial workers across Canada and internationally, would hit the company hard financially and force it onto the back foot. Moreover, the conditions for broadening the struggle are extremely favourable. Just hours before NSC workers walked off the job, the International Longshore Workers Union (ILWU) issued a 72-hour strike notice for over 7,000 dockworkers at ports on Canada's West Coast. Less than 100 miles from Hamilton, Ontario, in Erie, Pennsylvania, 1,400 workers who build Wabtec locomotives began strike action on June 22.

The issues in the dockworkers and Wabtec locomotive struggles are similar to those facing NSC workers. Everywhere workers confront a capitalist ruling elite determined to make them pay for the war abroad and the enrichment of the financial oligarchy at home.

NSC's "final offer" contained pitiful wage increases of 4 percent in the first year and 3 percent in the next two years, without any cost-of-living adjustments (COLA). This, after inflation soared above 8 percent last year, and with workers continuing to have to contend with explosive increases in the price of basic necessities like housing and food and huge interest rate increases. In a clear attempt to split the membership, certain skilled trades designations were granted an additional \$1 per hour raise in the first and third years.

The "incentive" piecework system, which the company exploits to push workers to work at an evermore backbreaking pace, was left untouched under the company's "final offer." Union officials have refused to oppose the

“incentive” system, which places workers’ lives and limbs at risk, underscoring that this scheme continues with their support.

It has helped NSC owner Greg Aziz earn bumper profits through the rampant exploitation of the workforce, driving work speedup, pitting workers against one another and creating deadly working conditions like the ones that have killed three workers in as many years.

Likewise, the two-tier wage and pension system was left untouched. The exploitative one-year “training rate” for new hires, combined with high turnover as a result of terrible pay and working conditions, guarantees a stream of low-paid labourers for the company. Pensions have been split since 2012 between defined benefit plans for “legacy” workers and market-oriented defined contribution plans for everyone else. The USW bureaucracy facilitated both of these attacks on the rank and file.

Perhaps the most insulting clause in the proposed agreement was the creation of two full-time “Health and Safety Representatives,” who would merely serve as rubber stamps for the company’s grueling production schedules and total neglect of elementary safety measures.

NSC workers can win this strike and secure their demands, but they can only do so by taking their struggle out of the hands of the USW bureaucracy, led at the plant by USW Local 7135 President and longtime union bureaucrat Frank Crowder and his administration. Workers should join the newly-established National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee (NSC-RFC), which was founded to place decision-making power in the hands of workers on the shop floor.

As the NSC-RFC’s founding statement states:

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.

The truth of these words was amply demonstrated at an informational session held by the Local 7135 leadership last

Sunday, June 25. At the meeting, which was attended by several hundred militant rank-and-file workers, the assembled panel of USW local and District 6 bureaucrats tried to palm off the company’s provocative offer as a deal with “real money” on the table, while also stating that they were not recommending a vote for or against.

During the question-and-answer session, the mood of the audience was summed up in a comment by a rank-and-file worker who approached the microphone and said, “I don’t understand how we can call half the rate of inflation real money! How’s that real money on the table? That’s play money, boys.” His comment was met with cheers and loud applause, after which workers began streaming out.

As if to highlight the union’s servile pro-company outlook, Crowder ended the meeting, lamenting that he did not think the rank and file could last for long during a strike in which the USW would issue a measly \$260 in strike pay per week and only after the workers had completed four weeks on strike. The USW bureaucracy sits on a strike fund of over \$850 million. It denies workers access to the necessary resources to wage a genuine struggle because the union apparatus is focused on maintaining its close ties to the corporate elite, which it serves as a key mechanism for suppressing the class struggle. The USW has imposed decades of concessions on workers across North America and is a key pillar of support for the Trudeau Liberal government that is wasting billions of dollars on imperialist wars abroad and enriching the financial oligarchy at home.

The newly-established NSC-RFC proposes that workers develop a rebellion against the bureaucracy by orienting to the international working class. This must include demanding the immediate payment of at least \$500 per week in strike pay. As its founding statement says in conclusion, “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 counteroffensive against the ruling elite’s class war agenda of imperialist war, attacks on democratic rights and austerity.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact