Strike by 1,400 National Steel Car workers in Canada continues as strikers report health benefit cut-off

Dylan Lubao
3 July 2023

The National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee is holding a public meeting on Thursday, July 6, at 7 p.m. eastern time. The NSC-RFC encourages all National Steel Car workers and other industrial and manufacturing workers throughout Canada and the United States to register here to attend. Steps are being to taken to ensure the anonymity of worker participants. Email nscrfc@gmail.com to contact the committee directly.

The strike by 1,400 National Steel Car workers in Hamilton, Ontario, enters its sixth day Tuesday. The workers, who manufacture rail cars for some of the largest Class I railroads, are fighting for wage increases above inflation, the abolition of multi-tier pay and pensions, and an end to dangerous working conditions in the plant. They confront one of the most ruthless employers in Canada, which has presided over the deaths of three workers on the job in as many years and a union bureaucracy in the United Steelworkers (USW) that has refused to lead any genuine struggle against the company.

The striking workers are in a powerful position to win their strike. Their struggle is part of an upsurge of the class struggle across North America, including the strike by 7,400 west coast Canadian dock workers launched Saturday at ports across British Columbia. At Wabtec in Erie, Pennsylvania, where workers build locomotives, more than 1,400 are on strike less than 100 miles away from the NSC plant.

An urgent task facing NSC workers is to unify their struggle with these and other sections of the working class into a joint counter-offensive against the relentless demands from the corporate elite for concessions and the maintenance of dangerous working conditions.

Underscoring the contempt felt by NSC management towards the strikers, workers have reported to the *World Socialist Web Site* that the company has cut off their health benefits. Workers have been left to pay hundreds of dollars out of pocket for basic procedures under conditions in which the miserly $260 per week in strike pay provided from the USW's gargantuan $850 million strike fund only kicks in after several weeks of strike action.

Summing up the simmering outrage on the picket line towards the company and its accomplices in the union bureaucracy, one worker told the WSWS, "Members are tired of being manipulated every time we go into negotiation and they are also tired of constant increases of the numbers to achieve the piece work with no regard to proper breaks or lunch or even time to clean up and make sure everything is safe. Then we are bullied by upper management coming down to the line and intimidating the workforce. We are also tired of the loss of life that we have incurred in the last three years, and still no change."

Just before the strike began last Thursday, company management reached out to the USW negotiating committee and offered an insulting additional one percentage point to the wage increase in the tentative agreement's first year, as well as a pathetic $500 signing bonus. This clearly shows that the company's "last, best and final offer" was nothing of the kind. Even with the marginally improved offer, workers would receive an inadequate 5 percent increase in the first year, followed by 3 percent in the next two years.

The initial offer, which workers rejected by 52 percent, contained below-inflation annual pay increases (4 percent, 3 percent, 3 percent, respectively), maintained the hated and brutal "incentive" piecework scheme, and kept in place the two-tier wage and pension system, which the USW agreed to in previous contracts.

Rank-and-file NSC workers will not advance a single step further as long as this strike is left in the hands of the nationalist and pro-corporate USW bureaucracy, led at the plant by Local 7135 President Frank Crowder. To take the struggle forward, workers must join and build the National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee (NSC-RFC), which represents the interests of workers on the shop floor.

The USW bureaucracy has sought to strike a militant pose among the strikers by gloating about its immediate rejection of the company's slightly improved offer made just before the strike began. But this begs the question; why did the USW negotiating committee not immediately reject the company's worse initial offer? Why did the union claim at a June 25 information session that it could not recommend a vote for or against?

© World Socialist Web Site

The answer is simple. The negotiating committee's supposed "rejection" of the company's eleventh-hour offer was nothing but a ploy, meant to distract workers from the reality that the company and the union bureaucracy are on the same side, as they have been for many years.

Had the negotiating committee strongly endorsed a "No" vote on the tentative agreement and committed the USW's resources to waging and winning the strike, workers' confidence would have been given a huge boost, and the tentative agreement would have been resoundingly defeated. As it was, the USW bureaucracy's refusal to take a position and advance any strategy to fight the company had the effect of demoralizing some of the workers, producing the narrow 52 percent rejection.

The union is counting on the immense financial pressures produced by its starvation strike rations to browbeat workers into accepting the next union-company contract. The USW apparatus is intentionally isolating the strikers, having done nothing to mobilize support from the USW's 1.2 million members. Workers have been treated to a handful of visits by union bureaucrats and local politicians to the picket line for photo ops and potted "solidarity" statements. The big business New Democratic Party (NDP), which fraudulently claims it stands for workers while propping up the pro-austerity and pro-war federal Liberal government, has not issued an official statement on the strike.

The USW's treachery cannot simply be explained by referring to the bad characteristics of individual bureaucrats. Staffed with well-paid or aspiring bureaucrats whose privileges rest on the union-corporate-government collective bargaining system, the interests of the union bureaucracy are aligned with capitalists like NSC owner Greg Aziz, Ontario Tory Premier Doug Ford, and Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, not with the rank-and-file. The integration of unions like the USW into a corporatist alliance with big business and the government was underscored by the recent naming of former USW President Leo Gerard as a "Companion of the Order of Canada." Gerard was a key supporter of the trade war measures pursued by the Trudeau government and Trump administration to lay the basis for North America's twin imperialist powers to wage war against Russia and China.

The NSC-RFC, set up by workers to seize control of their struggle from the USW bureaucracy, advances a diametrically opposed perspective based on the urgent necessity of unifying workers' struggles internationally. As the NSC-RFC declared in its founding statement:

> 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 (IWA-RFC). 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.

The NSC strike can and must act as the starting point for developing such a movement. NSC occupies an important position in the North American economy, which the strikers could exploit to bring the company to its knees. Its railcars are used by major Class I railroads. Production delays of these cars and the refusal by rail workers to handle them would lead to supply chain disruptions.

In its latest statement, the NSC-RFC proposed precisely such a broadening of the struggle, declaring:

> We know there is a Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee that was set up during the recent contract struggle in the US, when the Biden administration AND the various "union" bureaucracies shoved a sellout contract down workers' throats, including by conniving in the adoption of a law criminalizing any worker job action.
>
> National Steel Car adds on to orders and builds cars to lease under the reporting mark of NSCX. We ask our American class brothers and sisters, if you're working in a switcher yard and you see that mark, put the car aside and let it rot! Don't let NSC scab on us and make money while we are out!

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site