Stop the United Steelworkers bureaucracy's threats against the National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee and intimidation of its supporters!

National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee
17 July 2023

Over 1,400 workers at the National Steel Car plant in Hamilton, Ontario, have been on strike for close to three weeks. They are demanding major pay increases to keep pace with inflation and an end to the horrendous safety record at the plant, which has claimed the lives of three workers on the job in as many years. Rank-and-file workers established the National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee to seize control of their contract struggle from the United Steelworkers bureaucracy, which has refused throughout to wage any serious fight against the rail car manufacturer. To join the National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee, email nscrfc@gmail.com.

Brothers and Sisters,

There seems to be a discrepancy with respect to the term "solidarity." We're addressing this because the members of the National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee (NSC-RFC) and the United Steelworkers (USW) bureaucrats have different definitions of the word.

We have heard reports from workers on the picket line that USW bureaucrats are searching high and low for NSC-RFC members, who are the target of violent threats by union goons. We also found out that two reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* were accosted recently by the current Recording Secretary while they visited the picket line. Since then, we have been hearing about how these reporters were being "disruptive" and were sowing "disunity" and "confusion," and thereby breaking down the necessary solidarity to win us a good contract.

It was also floated that the actions that we in the NSC-RFC are taking would allow National Steel Car to force a bad deal down our throats. Or, that this was some kind of money-taking scam.

We can assure you that, unlike the USW bureaucracy that takes its cut every two weeks from us (and is about to starve us out by handing us a pittance of OUR MONEY as strike pay while they sit on a strike fund worth around $850 million), no one in our committee has their hands out demanding money. This was nothing more than a cheap and unfounded slander.

It should also be understood that the coverage the WSWS has provided of our plant did not just start two weeks ago. Unlike the mainstream media, who have only shown a superficial interest in our issues since we went on strike on June 29, the WSWS has been reporting on NSC for over a decade now, starting with the USW-imposed sellout of our 2009 strike.

Just type "National Steel Car WSWS" into any search engine and you will see what we mean. Or, see examples here, here and here. Have any of the other media outlets bothered to do more than regurgitate the talking points of the union, the company or the government?

Again, unlike the mainstream media, who are allowing our struggle to be used as a photo-op by opportunistic New Democratic Party politicians (looking at you, Marit Stiles and Matthew Green) to drum up votes, the WSWS has been covering our issues from a pro-worker perspective.

Quite frankly, all of these slanders, threats and diversions are a steaming pile of BS. They are designed to divert NSC workers' attention and funnel it back into the silo of action tolerated by the USW bureaucrats.

If there is an issue with solidarity at all, it might come from the apathy caused by the various Local 7135 executives we have had over the last decade and a half. It might have been because of below-inflation wage increases even when inflation was relatively low.

We can certainly remember the thankfully retired Lawrence Hay telling us at two separate ratification meetings that 2 percent to 2.5 percent wage increases were the "industry standard." He sounded more like a cheap labour contractor than a "union man."

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Could the “disunity” be caused by the giveaways during that period, which still exist? Namely, the hours to make the union and the “training rates” used as a lower tier in wages?

Could the “disunity” be caused by all the internecine squabbling (including USW audits of the finances of the Local) that went on for the better part of the last decade? In light of that possibility, the comments from our Recording Secretary seem to be a fit of projection. After all, he was intimately involved in that squabbling.

In the end, we suspect the “solidarity” the USW demands is better defined as obedience to its bureaucratic plan for “success.” That “success” being things like below-inflation wage increases, the continuation of piecework and absolutely nothing done to address deaths on the job.

This committee’s definition of solidarity is quite different. Ours is the solidarity of the working class as an interlinked class across national borders and industries. We have put forward ideas and strategies to assist us in our struggle, such as having railroad workers put aside cars leased by NSC with the marker “NSCX,” so as to keep NSC from profiting while we are out on strike. We have heard precisely nothing from the USW on this.

We have asked that our struggle be linked to the struggle by dockworkers on the Canadian and American West Coast. Why would we do that? Well, the cars we build in P7 are intermodal well cars (three packs). They are used in transporting shipping containers from ships onto trains. Where is the USW on this question? The last we checked the USW and International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) are both members of the Canadian Labour Congress. Nothing but silence.

Or the issues at Wabtec in Erie, Pennsylvania. The employer is using scab labour to break that strike. We use Wabtec components in the Truck and Axle shop. Again, the USW has us stuck in a silo, unable to link this to a broader struggle, giving us leverage to win.

The issues faced by BC dockworkers and workers at Wabtec are almost identical to ours. Even though all of us suffering from below-inflation wage increases negotiated by the union, unsafe working conditions, poor benefit plans, lower wage tiers for new employees, etc., it is pretty clear that the USW apparatus has no interest or intention to broaden our struggle even though the links are easy to see.

The USW bureaucracy, “solidarity” phrase mongering aside, is more interested in keeping the equilibrium between employers and themselves intact. In the final analysis, this is what we suspect is behind their unease with workers beginning to see the possibility of their own independence. We also suspect this is behind the intimidation tactics and smear jobs designed to silence dissent. It is not a sign of strength but an indication of weakness.

There is another serious issue here as it relates to the class division in the society we live in. The ruling class in this country, of which CEO Greg Aziz is an unapologetic, card-carrying member, recognizes the importance of this strike. They see a potential victory by us as a fuse being lit that might set off a cascading chain reaction.

It would embolden others in Canada and elsewhere to stand up and fight the ruling class’ demands from being imposed on them. Undoubtedly we are seen as ungrateful and undeserving rebellious slaves who need to be taught a harsh lesson to get us back in line and serve as an example for other workers.

This brings two related things into focus:

- The necessity to link our struggle at NSC with similar ones currently going on on this continent and overseas.
- Why does the USW not make even the slightest attempt at this and keeps us isolated? It is almost as if they are playing to lose.

We are at a crossroads. If the USW bureaucracy remains in control of this strike, it will starve us into submission, so that the next rotten offer Aziz makes will look enticing by comparison. Can anyone argue otherwise? None of us can survive for long on $260 per week.

But we have an alternative. By building power on the shop floor through the NSC-RFC, we can demand that strike pay be made equivalent to our regular pay, putting us in a better position to win. Instead of sitting around on the picket line for photo ops with politicians and union bureaucrats who do not care about us, we can develop real links with our brothers and sisters at Stelco, Dofasco, the railroads, the docks, the auto industry and even the health science industries that are on the rise in this region. In addition, we can and must demand an end to all intimidation tactics against the NSC-RFC and publications like the WSWS that speak on behalf of rank-and-file workers like us.

It may sound like a tall order, but it is a start, and it is a heck of a lot more than the whole USW bureaucracy has done for as long as any of us can remember. The future is determined in struggle, and that begins with rank-and-file workers taking a stand for themselves and each other. For that reason, we encourage all NSC workers to join the NSC-RFC and build the type of organization we would all like to see. Contact us at nscrfc@gmail.com.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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