

Striking National Steel Car worker on the need for rank-and-file committees: “All the USW bureaucrats have made their peace with the system a long time ago”

A striking National Steel Car worker
21 July 2023

Around 1,400 workers at National Steel Car’s rail car manufacturing plant in Hamilton, Ontario, have been on strike since June 29. They are fighting for wage increases which make up for inflation and improvements to the atrocious safety conditions at the plant, which has claimed the lives of three workers on the job in as many years.

The workers are not just fighting a ruthless employer, but also the United Steelworkers (USW) bureaucracy, which has refused to wage a genuine struggle against the company. The USW gave no recommendation on how workers should vote on the company’s “best and final offer” prior to the launching of the strike, even though it met none of the workers’ demands.

The bureaucracy’s failure to call for a decisive “no” vote was bound up with its determination to demoralize workers so they can soften them up on the picket line on poverty strike pay to accept a rotten concessions agreement at the first opportunity. Since the strike began, the USW has done nothing to expand it to other sections of workers, including dockworkers in struggle on the West Coast and Wabtec workers at a locomotive manufacturing plant less than 100 miles from the National Steel Car facility in Erie, Pennsylvania.

In response to the bureaucracy’s effort to work with NSC management to enforce a sellout, workers at the plant formed the National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee (NSC-RFC) to place the conduct of the strike in the hands of the rank-and-file. At a recent public meeting organized by the committee, a striking NSC worker made the following contribution.

Workers who are interested in building the committee

and developing their struggle into a broader offensive can contact the NSC-RFC at nscrfc@gmail.com.

Brothers and Sisters,

Thanks for taking the time to listen to what we are attempting to do here. We realize that what we are doing is a bit of a shock and a wake-up call to some. The biggest question we have heard to all of this from the rank and file, after much general agreement is “What is the purpose of this?” or “I agree but we have a union already!”

The answer to that question is fairly simple. We have come to realize that the USW, like all the other AFL-CIO/CLC “unions” cannot be reformed into organizations of working class power. Regardless of their past history, which we admit was impressive, the social and economic conditions when they were effective have changed and are never coming back.

It needs to be noted that during that greatest period of union expansion during the 1930s it was socialist-minded workers that were the driving force behind that mass movement of the working class. This is what led to these victories the unions have given away piece by piece over the last four decades. It is also worth noting that after World War II, the trade union bureaucrats made sure to purge any of these socialist elements out of the trade union movement. “Red scare” stuff. Mustn’t ruffle the feathers of the employers with rabble rousers. The United Steelworkers of America was a major driving force in removing the “militants” from the CCF, the forerunner to the NDP in the late 1950s. These organizations have long since given up any

working class advocacy for “going along to get along” with the employers they work with.

Working with them is the key phrase here because these organizations (the USW, Teamsters, Unifor, UFCW, etc.) have entered into what is called “labour/management partnerships.” They have claimed that the goals of the employers and the people that work for them are essentially the same. This is why we have seen so many concessionary contracts signed year after year after hearing a lot of tough talk from union leaders. By the way, this has all been justified as an attempt to “save jobs.”

In other words, these “unions” have, over the last 4 decades, VOLUNTARILY made us poor and powerless to satisfy the owners of a system that is intent on making us poor and powerless. All to “save jobs.” How’s Hilton Works looking these days with 600 people working there? In 1981 there were 13,000 people working there. The USW has been there the whole time and overseen this. Technological advances in steelmaking and corporate takeovers aside, one would think an organization for people working in the steel industry might have something to say about that long road downward.

Having been around NSC for a while and seen union executive after union executive come and go, we no longer believe there is an electoral solution to the problems we face at National Steel Car. To be honest, we believe the current executive to be sincere in what it is doing. But we also know that the executive only accepts what it can do within the trade union movement. In other words, what is acceptable to the trade-off between union bureaucrats and the employers they interact with. Anything outside of that is dismissed as “utopian” and “impossible.”

The problem is that they are also running up against a bureaucracy that has its own agenda, regardless of rhetoric. This was noticeable at the meeting on June 25 in the body language of the Local president and the District 6 staff rep. We know the president knew this was a garbage deal just by looking at him. We also saw the staff rep attempt to make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear attempting to sell it to us. We couldn’t find a more stark reminder about the differences of the rank and file and the USW bureaucracy at that meeting if we tried!

The purpose of the founding of the National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee was to break free of this

bureaucracy and create an organization to assert our own independence. It cannot be reformed any longer. There is no new mousetrap to build. We have no designs on becoming the next executive. We have no interest in hobnobbing with the likes of Marty Warren. We are not terribly impressed with Leo Gerard’s Order of Canada award. That award just proves that Leo, like all the USW bureaucrats, have made their peace with the system a long time ago. We’re glad you’ve decided to attend and we hope to have a civil discussion about the current issues we have and creating a path going forward.



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