

United Steelworkers union sells out strike of 1,400 workers at National Steel Car in Hamilton, Ontario

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We urge all NSC workers to contact the NSC-RFC at nscrfc@gmail.com and join the fight to build a genuine workers' organization in opposition to the pro-company USW bureaucracy.

The strike of 1,400 workers at National Steel Car (NSC) in Hamilton, Ontario, ended after 41 days, with workers ratifying Tuesday a three-year sellout contract orchestrated by the United Steelworkers (USW) bureaucracy.

The National Steel Car workers, who have suffered decades of declining real wages and deadly working conditions, mounted a courageous struggle. But the pro-capitalist USW apparatus, led at the plant by Local 7135 President Frank Crowder, intentionally starved them out and isolated them from other workers' struggles.

As a result, the workers ultimately accepted a rotten deal that does not restore the long-abolished cost-of-living protection (COLA clause) or provide wage "increases" equal to the recent price surge. Moreover, by failing to end piece-work or establish workers' control over production, the new contract virtually guarantees that the spate of grisly workplace deaths and injuries of the past few years will continue unabated.

The contract was ratified by 825-118, with the total vote representing roughly 67 percent of the union membership. When "No" votes and abstentions are combined, the contract passed with only 58 percent support, indicating a profound level of rank-and-file disaffection with the union leadership and a realization that the USW was collaborating with the company to impose a sellout.

The USW apparatus made clear from the start that it did not want a strike. It refused to give workers a recommendation on how they should vote on NSC's "best and final offer" prior to the outbreak of the strike, which included a pathetic 4 percent increase in the first year of the contract. The USW bureaucracy hoped that its refusal to take a stand against the company's provocative offer would intimidate the workers into voting for it. Instead, the agreement was repudiated by a 52 percent majority. The minor gains achieved in the final agreement ratified this week were thus entirely due to the fact that workers rebelled against the USW bureaucracy.

Workers were presented with "highlights" of the new tentative agreement at a union meeting on August 5. Contrary to the negotiating committee's celebratory rhetoric, the new contract contained only minor "gains" over the initial two offers. These

will be more than erased by the cost of the strike itself and the skyrocketing cost of living.

Wage increases in the new contract equal 6 percent, 4 percent, and 3 percent per year, respectively. This is only 3 percent more than the company's initial offer and does not include any cost-of-living adjustments, so it does little to combat the 8 percent inflation of last year. Nor does it offer any protection from a potential recession, signs of which are mounting. Skilled-trades workers will receive an additional \$1 per hour wage increase in years one and three of the contract.

The ratified agreement adds \$1 per hour to defined-benefit pensions in the first year, matching years two and three. However, pensions will remain split between defined-benefit pensions for high-seniority workers and inferior defined-contribution pensions for newer workers, who make up the majority of the workforce. The two-tier wage system that allows NSC to pay new workers reduced wages in their first year remains in place. There is also a \$1,000 signing bonus, which workers report is conditional on a spotless attendance record and will be heavily taxed.

The piecework, or "incentive" system, which the union apparatus falsely claimed it would fight to abolish, remains completely intact. NSC owner Greg Aziz uses this highly exploitative scheme to speed up production and boost company profits. It is the primary reason, along with management's general indifference to worker safety, for the three workplace deaths and countless injuries at the plant over the past few years.

What the USW bureaucracy declares a "significant victory" is in fact a massive sellout engineered by the union itself. As one worker wrote on the union local's "Roadrunner" Facebook group: "Strikes are supposed to be meaningful and undeniably change the economic fortune of the worker/employee. After 5 weeks this is a huge loss of the local."

For good measure, another worker replied, "6% is sh**!"

In contrast to the treacherous role of the USW bureaucracy, which did everything it could to sow discouragement, the National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee (NSC-RFC), established by shop floor workers on the eve of the strike, blazed a new path for the rank-and-file. The committee has become a pole of opposition to the pro-corporate USW leadership. The statements it published during the strike on the *World Socialist Web Site* were read by hundreds of workers at NSC and many more around the world.

To the extent that the rank-and-file rebelled against the USW's sellout strategy, it was because of the intervention of the NSC-RFC in collaboration with the *World Socialist Web Site*, whose articles and statements were read by hundreds of workers at NSC and many more around the world.

The NSC-RFC's emphatic call for a "No" vote played a major role in the rejection of the company's June "last, best offer," under conditions where the union apparatus refused to make a recommendation for or against. The union's gross abdication of leadership was designed to destroy the morale of the rank-and-file by making clear that the USW was not prepared to wage a serious struggle against the company. USW Region 6 bureaucrats even had the nerve to claim at an info session that Aziz's provocative offer represented "real money." Workers deserted the meeting halfway through and booed the negotiating committee as they left.

The NSC-RFC advanced its own demands, not based on the breadcrumbs the company was willing to part with, but on what rank-and-file workers actually needed. These demands included:

- 10 percent annual wage increases plus COLA
- End of the piecework system
- End of the two-tier "Training Rate" wage system
- Immediate doubling of healthcare benefits to \$20,000
- An additional week of paid vacation
- Rank-and-file control of contract negotiations, conducted publicly
- Rank-and-file control over plant safety

The NSC-RFC made a powerful appeal to rank-and-file workers across North America to build new organizations of struggle, rank-and-file committees, independent of and in opposition to the union apparatus. The committee specifically raised the necessity of forging links of struggle and solidarity within the broader working class:

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.

These warnings were fully confirmed as the USW starved workers out on \$260 per week in strike pay, despite sitting on a strike fund of around \$850 million. Financial conditions became so severe that one NSC worker was reportedly reduced to homelessness by the end of the strike.

The union refused to mobilize any of its hundreds of thousands of members across North America for a joint struggle with the NSC workers. Although a significant opportunity existed to combine the struggles of 7,200 British Columbia dockworkers and 1,400 Pennsylvania locomotive manufacturing workers, who went on strike simultaneously with NSC workers, the USW bureaucracy did not even inform its striking members of these strikes.

Instead, one capitalist politician after another was brought onto

the picket line to pledge their "solidarity" with the striking workers. These included elected officials like Ontario New Democratic Party (NDP) leader Marit Stiles and federal NDP leader Jagmeet Singh, whose party is in a de facto coalition government with Justin Trudeau and his Liberals, Canadian big business' traditional preferred party of national government.

With the company's cut-off of health benefits in the strike's first week, and its subsequent withholding of vacation pay that workers were legally entitled to, the company tightened the financial screws on workers. The union bureaucracy advanced no legitimate answer to these attacks because they served their strategy of wearing down the rank-and-file. Instead, Steelworker officials, harassed and red-baited WSWs reporters who visited the picket line and systematically sought to weed out NSC-RFC members among the workforce.

The NSC-RFC insisted that the USW's actions were bound up with its support for the union-NDP-Liberal alliance. For decades this corporatist partnership has served as an instrument of the capitalist elite to suppress the class struggle, confining working class resistance to isolated strikes waged within the pro-employer collective bargaining system and tying workers politically to the pro-austerity and pro-war Liberals and NDP.

While the NSC workers were waging their six-week strike, the union and NDP-backed Liberal government was using threats and anti-democratic provisions of the Canada Labour Code to break the militant BC dockers' strike. The suppression of workers' struggles is also a central component in the emerging union-backed, North American protectionist trade bloc between the United States, Canada, and Mexico, which the ruling class sees as critical to the waging of war against its rivals, including Russia and China.

For that reason, the NSC-RFC encouraged rank-and-file workers to join and build the committee, which is affiliated with the International Workers' Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), established to coordinate workers' struggles on a global scale. The committee urged workers to take up the struggle for socialism, a socio-economic system that advances the needs of the working class, not the private profits of millionaire fraudsters like Greg Aziz.

As the NSC-RFC powerfully stated in the midst of the strike, it is not going away. In the aftermath of this strike, the work of the NSC-RFC will become all the more critical as workers continue to face dangerous safety conditions, wages failing to keep pace with inflation and backbreaking piecework targets. We urge all NSC workers to contact the NSC-RFC at nscrfc@gmail.com and join the fight to build a genuine workers' organization in opposition to the pro-company USW bureaucracy.



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