

Autoworkers must build rank-and-file committees to stop a sellout by the UAW and Unifor!

Rail workers Rank-and-File Committee, National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee
6 October 2023

The following statement was drafted jointly by members of the Rail Workers Rank-and-File Committee in the United States and the National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, in support of the close to 170,000 autoworkers engaged in a contract battle against the Detroit Three on both sides of the Canada-US border. We strongly urge autoworkers and workers from other economic sectors to fill out the form that follows this statement on building a rank-and-file committee at your plant or workplace.

Brothers and sisters,

The members of the National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee (NSC-RFC) and the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee (RWRFC) stand in solidarity with our autoworker brothers and sisters on both sides of the border. This joint statement is an expression of the fundamental links of struggle between workers internationally.

We at the NSC-RFC and RWRFC can see that you are at a major crossroads. We see you itching at the chance to fight back against the auto companies to regain what you've lost over four decades of concessions, and to prevent the jobs bloodbath that will come with an employer-organized transition to electric vehicle production.

We also see you having to deal with the union bureaucracies of the United Auto Workers (UAW) and Unifor that have no interest in leading a fight against the auto companies. The UAW in the United States and Unifor in Canada have friends in high places and, as such, these labor bureaucracies enjoy a privileged position in the ruling circles of both countries.

It is this privileged position they are protecting when they cut sellout deals with the companies. They then tell you to take these "deals," claiming "this is the best we can get" or "we'll get them next time." Of course, the same song and dance is repeated "next time."

NEXT TIME IS NOW!

Autoworkers must learn the main lesson from the struggles of rail workers and NSC workers, which is the need to build rank-and-file committees in every plant as independent fighting organizations of the working class. These committees must be independent of the pro-company unions and made up of ordinary shop-floor employees.

During last year's explosive railroad workers' struggle, after

exhausting the bargaining process under the American Railway Labor Act, the rail union bureaucracies collaborated with the US government to block a strike by railroaders and force a hated agreement upon workers. Railroad workers had voted overwhelmingly in their various unions to strike. The democratic will of workers was subverted by the trade union bureaucracies through endless "cooling off" periods. These were extended until after the 2022 Congressional midterm elections, allowing Congress time to construct anti-strike legislation. This also gave Congress political cover until after the election. This was all accomplished under the watch of the administration of President Joe Biden, who has in the past boasted of being "the most pro union president in history." In truth, he supports and collaborates closely with the union bureaucrats, not the workers they claim to represent. Members of the Democratic Socialists of America also voted in favor of the anti-worker strikebreaking legislation.

Throughout the rail workers' struggle, the RWRFC fought to mobilize and organize workers against every effort by the rail union bureaucracies to impose concessions-filled contracts. The committee unified workers across trades and held meetings at which hundreds of workers were able to democratically discuss their demands and how to oppose the treachery of the union leaderships.

The recent experience of workers at National Steel Car in Canada was fundamentally the same. The United Steelworkers Union (USW) bureaucracy fully intended to force through a sellout contract from the start and avert a strike. However, it was a rank-and-file rebellion against the bureaucracy, which found its clearest expression in the establishment of the NSC-RFC, that forced a strike.

Without a strong willingness to fight among the rank-and-file, combined with the intervention of the *World Socialist Web Site*, NSC's initial concessionary contract proposal would likely have passed. At a mass meeting on June 25, the Steelworkers' apparatus used their tried and true "playbook" to sell us out, by refusing to oppose and even "talking up" NSC's entirely inadequate "offer," making clear they had no intention of leading a fight.

The level of opposition was evident at this meeting, where the negotiating committee was treated like a bunch of crooks, heckled and booed by the workers. Recognizing that openly backing the

deal could provoke an explosive response from the workers that it would struggle to control and determined to avoid a direct conflict with the company, the Local 7135 negotiating committee refused to make a “Yes” or “No” recommendation. We voted to reject the “offer” and walked out at midnight June 29. We did not receive strike pay until the third week of the strike. The strike pay was C\$260 a week. The USW has \$850 million in its “strike and defence fund,” the same as the UAW!

The NSC-RFC was formed to give the rank-and-file members a fighting option they would not otherwise have under the USW. It proposed a strategy to broaden the strike and hit the owner of NSC in other places to give us a chance at winning, including by expanding the struggle to rail workers handling NSC cars. The USW did absolutely nothing but keep us isolated while bringing their favored big-business politicians from the Liberal Party and New Democratic Party, and other union bureaucrats, to the picket line.

The USW’s hostility towards our democratic rights is replicated throughout the union bureaucracies on both sides of the Canada-US border. The UAW has shown time and again its disdain for workers’ democratic rights, most recently in its flagrant disregard of the overwhelming strike vote by 150,000 autoworkers. Nearly three weeks after the expiration of their contracts, the UAW bureaucracy has kept more than four-fifths of Detroit Three workers on the job producing profits for the auto giants as part of its phony “stand-up strike.” As for Unifor, it violated its own rules to ram through a sham contract at Ford Canada last month, giving workers less than 24 hours to vote using an online system that excluded many from participating.

These betrayals are indicative of the degeneration and fecklessness of the trade union bureaucracy, beholden to government power. In the interests of the US and Canadian governments’ unquenchable thirst for war directed towards Russia and China, these worker struggles must be repressed at all costs. The fragile supply chain must continue to function to satiate US and Canadian imperialism and prepare a redivision of the world.

Contracts are up on both sides of the border at the same time and auto workers are facing the very same issues. Yet the UAW and Unifor attempt at every turn to prevent this from becoming an international fight to save jobs and income by fomenting American and Canadian nationalism. The UAW and Unifor pit workers on both sides of the border against each other again, in a race to the bottom. They are marketing their workers to the auto companies as the cheaper option.

This corporatist and nationalist outlook, which subordinates workers’ basic needs to capitalist profit, characterizes the AFL-CIO, CLC and Unifor bureaucracies and is the reason why they act in the manner that they do.

We are now facing a period where industry is so interconnected that international borders are virtually meaningless. To build an automobile, parts and pieces cross the Mexican/US/Canadian border several times. Insofar as these borders mean anything at all, it is to bring forward corporate and military blocs and alliances to maintain the obscene profits of corporations and wage war. This is why the governments have stepped in and forced contracts on rail workers and dockworkers in the US and Canada. And it is

undoubtedly why Mr. Biden has such a keen interest in the “negotiations” between the UAW and the auto companies.

These struggles are not merely economic. There is a political component as well. Economic, as demonstrated by a continual degradation of living standards for the working class and in that these attacks on workers are implemented to feed big business’ insatiable need to increase profits. Political, in the need to keep supply lines operating in service to an imperialist war machine. Political, also in the recognition that no political party of the ruling class will work to alleviate the plight of the working class. Rather, they use political power to enforce the dictates of the Wall and Bay Street financial elites. The numerous political, economic, and social crises that confront the working class are the result of the capitalist system, i.e., capitalist ownership of the means of production and the division of the world into rival nation states.

To wage an effective struggle, autoworkers must build rank-and-file committees at every factory, affiliate with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, smash the union bureaucracies and restore power to workers on the shop floor. Just as the system of capitalist production operates on a worldwide scale, so must the workers’ movement. Workers must bring the fight to the world arena and link up rank-and-file committees across every industrial sector and across all countries of the world.

The potential to develop such a movement was underscored by socialist candidate for UAW president Will Lehman, who won 5,000 votes in the union’s first national election for its top office in 2022. Will ran on a platform of dismantling the bureaucracy and placing decision making into the hands of the rank and file. A central message of his campaign was the need to unify American, Canadian, and Mexican autoworkers in a common struggle against the global operations of the auto giants. We urge our fellow workers in the auto, parts, and related industries who agree with this strategy to contact the WSWS today and begin the process of building a rank-and-file committee at your plant or workplace.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact