

Seven months after the USW sold out our strike: Layoffs, speed-up, and a structurally unsound National Steel Car plant in Hamilton, Ontario

National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee
29 March 2024

The National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee was established prior to the six-week strike conducted last summer by 1,400 workers at the NSC plant in Hamilton, Ontario, where rail cars for the major railroad companies are manufactured. To contact the committee, email nscrfc@gmail.com.

Brothers and Sisters,

The honeymoon period of our new contract has worn off and objective reality is setting in. To properly understand where we are now, we must review the recent past.

Almost a year ago, “negotiations” for our collective agreement between National Steel Car (NSC) and the United Steelworkers (USW) started. This culminated in a “take it or leave it offer” on June 23. After the USW bureaucracy slow-walked the talks to keep us demobilized, they informed us of this offer at a mass meeting on June 25. That meeting showed how outraged workers at NSC were when the insulting “offer” was put to the floor. Eager to avoid leading any genuine struggle, the USW bureaucracy refused to take a position on how we should vote. It contained wage “increases” of 4 percent in Year 1 and 3 percent in the following two years.

We had 48 hours to think it over, and we decisively voted it down. It was because of this “no” vote, which amounted to a rebellion against the bureaucracy, that we went out on strike on June 29. Underscoring its ruthless disregard for its workers, NSC immediately stopped our benefits!

Meanwhile, the USW used a tried-and-true method of diversion by parading its favoured NDP politicians and other union bureaucrats in front of us, while doing nothing to assist us to develop a strategy for victory. To soften us up to accept a rotten deal, the USW apparatus starved us out on \$260 a week in strike pay (the USW strike fund sits at over \$850 million) and deliberately isolated us from other ongoing struggles (BC dockworkers, Pennsylvania locomotive manufacturing workers).

At the end of July, to compound his well-known criminality, NSC owner Greg Aziz withheld our vacation pay. All we got from the USW on that was threats of legal action that would take months.

On August 5, we had another union meeting where we were

informed that all the things the executive had intended to bargain for, including the elimination of the piece-work based “incentives” system and improvements to our conditions, were magically forgotten. We got a straight money deal—6 percent in Year 1, 4 percent in Year 2, 3 percent in Year 3. An additional ten thousand dollars on the benefits. The trades got an extra dollar an hour in Years 1 and 3. To bribe us into accepting the “deal,” we got a \$1,000 “signing bonus.” A “bonus” which was subject to taxes and based on attendance!

What has happened since?

Once the “honeymoon” phase wore off and the reality of what had happened set in, attitudes have changed. Firstly, the USW has been blowing sunshine up our rear ends telling us how courageous we were and how they are using what we did as a template for negotiations elsewhere. What an insulting crock!

The USW did everything it could to deter us from striking at all. They made a serious attempt on June 25 to sell us out with that initial insulting “offer.” We all remember the District 6 rep telling us “There’s real money there!” The current executive deliberately, and in an act of outright cowardice, gave no recommendations to vote yes or no on that offer. They hoped this would sow enough confusion to get the sell out through. What we did was we rebelled, not only against the company, but against the union bureaucracy that claims to be standing up for us. In other words, whatever we got, and it was nowhere near enough, we got by ourselves. No thanks at all to the bureaucratic industrial police force known as the United Steelworkers.

The fact that they go around claiming this is a template they use AND that employers are agreeing to this is another red flag. That any employer would agree to this is not because they are afraid of a strike or the USW. It’s because a strike that remains under the control of the union bureaucracy, with workers isolated on the picket line for weeks on starvation strike pay, does not hurt

employers at all and allows the USW to bluster as if it has accomplished something.

But there is even more. This contract at NSC, and the USW's attitude towards it, is a microcosm of the nonsense about "historic contracts" workers have heard from Unifor, the UAW, the Teamsters and other union officials on the sell out contracts they have signed recently. We are now seeing layoffs in the auto sector as the globally mobile automakers take advantage of the pro-corporate agreements rammed through by Shawn Fain's UAW, Lana Payne's Unifor and Sean O'Brien's Teamsters.

It was recently asked on The Roadrunner (a Facebook page run by the current executive to misinform members) where the dues money goes and what it is used for. The union president put up a cartoon of a loonie from a USW brochure that is divided up into the percentages of where every dollar goes. On the bottom, it says 7 cents "goes to the Defense Fund to give locals strength when bargaining...and ensure workers receive a fair share of their company's success."

The USW is giving away more here than it probably wants to. This is the Strike and Defense fund, and it is OUR money. This is the fund that the USW refused to use properly to assist us in our struggle. This organization is the junior partner in the corporate/capitalist profit game and works with employers to get the best deal for them while keeping us in line and keeping those dues dollars flowing.

Since when has this fund allowed us to "receive a fair share?" Is it when the USW agreed to implement an "incentive" system at NSC which is the root cause of 3 gruesome deaths over the last 3-and-a-half years? Is it when management at NSC is allowed to come up with various schemes to withhold "incentives," i.e., piecework pay, from workers? Who decided our "fair share" last summer? The "incentive" issue, which was a central plank of the current executives "bargaining strategy," and the demand for COLA magically disappeared.

And we have another issue of concern that has recently come up: the structural integrity of the building we work in. The crane rail supports are cracking, undoubtedly due to overcapacity over long periods of time. This is also why the columns holding up the building need to be braced. Drilling holes in structural members for jib cranes without thinking of the long-term effects goes hand in hand with management's disinterest in our safety and lives.

The result is that the production ability of the plant is hindered, and people are starting to lose their jobs. Temporary layoffs have already been announced because the plant cannot operate at full capacity. The repairs are going to continue for some months, which will compound the general chaos in our daily work lives. Never mind the economic storm clouds on the horizon due to rising interest rates and war abroad. We're bearing the brunt of it all.

What has happened to the building is an example of malign neglect based on the private control of the means of production, including the edifice surrounding and holding up those means of production. The same lack of concern for the lives and safety of workers at NSC is paralleled by the lack of concern for the building we work in.

To Aziz, the profit motive is all that matters. Everything else

takes away from that. This is why there was not any real inspection of the structure of the building until the Ministry of Labour began looking into it. In a sick way, the malign neglect NSC has for its workers allowed us some insight into the malign neglect of the building we work in. The relative inhumanity of Aziz is not shocking, however. He treats the equestrian horses he owns better than the people who create the profits to have those equestrian horses.

What's the answer?

First and foremost, we need to confront objective reality. We stated last summer during the strike that we are in a fight not just with National Steel Car, but with the union that claims to be there to protect us. The very things we are seeing now from both the employer and union bureaucracy proves this statement correct. An understanding of the class character of the United Steel Workers bureaucracy and how they interact with the company to our detriment needs to be developed. Workers need organization, but the old ways are incompatible with the modern needs of the working class internationally.

The current labour organizations base themselves on two things. First, claiming to be "fighting" for their members on a national basis while the economy has long since gone global. Essentially losing a game before you've started playing. And second, never questioning the system of profit, that is to say capitalism itself. It is these two things that are used by these "labour" organizations to put us in a straitjacket and keep us divided from our class brothers in other countries dealing with the exact same problems.

The National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees are fighting to overcome these divisions. We aim to build a movement to organize the working class internationally and break out of the national silos imposed on us by the trade union bureaucracies.

If you agree with us, and we know from the response last summer many do, join us. We need to build new organizations of working class power and this specific committee as a strong base of opposition against the USW bureaucracy that clearly works to maintain its comfortable relationship with management. Being blinded by mindless flag waving or thinking our fortunes will change by placing our hopes in the union and NDP backed "progressive" Liberal government are dead ends. The only force that has the power to change things for us is the working class ourselves. It is committees like this one that are the starting point of that counteroffensive.



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