

The way to commemorate our colleagues' deaths is to end the subordination of workers' lives to corporate profits at National Steel Car and beyond!

National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee
28 April 2024

The following statement was sent to the World Socialist Web Site by the National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee (NSCRFC). The NSCRFC was established at the company's plant in Hamilton, Ontario, on the eve of a seven-week strike waged by 1,400 workers last summer for substantial wage increases and an end to dangerous working conditions. You can contact the committee at nscrfc@gmail.com and read one of its previous statements on the lessons of last year's strike here.

Brothers and Sisters,

The recent United Steelworkers (USW) newsletter cover page was dedicated to the annual National Day of Mourning for workers who have been killed, injured, or suffered illness due to workplace-related hazards and exposures. This takes place on April 28 every year. The newsletter goes into a bit of the history involved in how this day came about. Some of the “highlights” include:

- The day started with the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) passing a resolution for a national day of mourning in 1983 at its annual convention.
- The Canadian Labour Congress passed a similar resolution at its annual convention in 1984.
- By 1989, the National Day of Mourning began to be recognized worldwide.
- In December of 1990, the Workers Day of Mourning Act was passed making April 28th, 1991 the National Day of Mourning. Flags are flown at half mast at all federal buildings (this will also be done at NSC).

The newsletter goes on to outline the purpose of the day, at least according to the various well-paid union bureaucracies:

- To remember and honour lives lost and injured.
- To renew the commitment to improving health and safety in the workplace.
- To prevent further deaths, injuries and diseases from work.

While we agree with all this on the surface, some serious questions must be asked here. The Day of Mourning and the stated purposes behind it has been in effect for 34 years. Yet at our workplace alone, four people, brothers Andrew Kenmuir, Fraser Cowan, Colin Grayley, Quoc Le, have been gruesomely killed in 20 years—three of them in less than two. Other than point 1, what has happened to point 2 and 3? And doesn't that make the National Day of Mourning largely

ineffective and performative?

The reason for its ineffectiveness can be understood by examining the basis of production and the class nature of the trade unions that started the Day and their current state. We also think it appropriate to bring up the old theory of “Social Murder” as it relates to working life under the capitalist system. To understand some of this, we need to review the recent past.

On the afternoon of Thursday June 9, 2022, USW Local 7135 and the Hamilton and District Labour Council called for a protest at the factory gates over the death of Quoc Le, which had happened the previous Monday. NSC closed the plant because of the protest, cynically claiming that it posed a threat to the “health and safety of our people, customers, suppliers, and, partners.”

At that protest, USW District 6 Director Myles Sullivan openly said that National Steel Car was “putting profits ahead of the lives and safety of the workers here.” (That was an earth-shattering insight, Captain Obvious!!!) Piecework was identified as the central culprit in the spate of industrial deaths we had seen to that point—three in 21 months up to that point. We agreed then and we agree now. This was even supposed to be a central plank in the “negotiations” the current executive talked about last year.

Yet, after the USW tried to block us from striking by ambushing us on June 25 with a tentative agreement that did nothing on piecework—an ambush which we defeated by voting the agreement down—the true nature of NSC reared its ugly head during our strike. NSC owner Greg Aziz withheld our vacation pay and the USW starved us out on the picket line on \$250 per week, despite the union controlling a strike fund with some \$850 million in it. Meanwhile, the piecework issue was dropped in the backroom “negotiations” that ultimately ended our strike with a sellout agreement.

The “incentive” or piecework is an antiquated form of production. It pits one worker against the other, thereby breaking down the necessary solidarity needed in the working class. The same “solidarity” the current executive and its various hog callers accused the NSCRFC of breaking down last summer. It forces, and incentivizes, workers to speed up and do things unsafely to gain a few extra crumbs of their rightful wage. This pressure is intensified by NSC's refusal to pay us a liveable base wage rate, something which the USW has tacitly accepted for decades.

We are two-and-a-half years out from another potential contract

“negotiation.” But this piecework issue, and the health and safety ramifications surrounding them, cannot be left untouched until the next round of “collective bargaining.” How many more of us will have been injured or even lose our lives if this system is not stopped now?

What is necessary is a fight for workers’ control over health and safety in the plant. We, who perform dangerous and demanding jobs on the line every day with sub-par equipment, should determine the pace of work, procedures to prevent workplace accidents, and necessary upgrades to our tools and the building to keep us safe. And we should do so with a liveable base wage, so we are not under financial pressures to cut corners to meet the arbitrary piecework target.

We mentioned the class nature of the trade unions. This is important because it helps explain why the USW leadership cannot wage a genuine struggle against piecework or to secure these other improvements in our conditions.

The unions base themselves on two things. They adhere to a program of nationalism that binds their members to an antiquated national silo when the economy has long since been internationalized. The unions also accept capitalism as the unending socio-economic system of organization within which they can work.

This is why the USW was promoting, and still does promote, the use of Bill C-45 or the Westray Bill. They claim the “kill a worker/go to jail” law will keep employers in line. It needs to be noted that since the law came into effect two decades ago in 2004, there have been only nine successful prosecutions. The best the law has done for the three recent deaths at NSC are:

- Fraser Cowan...\$140,000 fine and a 25 percent “victim surcharge fine” of \$35,000
- Collin Grayley...\$140,000 fine and a 25 percent “victim surcharge fine” of \$35,000
- Quoc Le...Pending

And no criminal charges have been laid to this point. So much for the USW’s faith in the legal process and parliamentary parties who claimed it would serve as a mechanism to hold employers accountable!

The fact that Aziz and countless other corporate executives get away scot free while presiding over workplaces that are nothing more than death traps brings to mind the concept of social murder. Here we quote Friedrich Engels on the matter:

When one individual inflicts bodily injury upon another such that death results, we call the deed manslaughter; when the assailant knew in advance that the injury would be fatal, we call this deed murder. But when society places hundreds of proletarians (workers) in such a position that they inevitably meet too early and an unnatural death, one which is quite as much a death by violence as that by the sword or bullet; when it deprives thousands of the necessities of life, places them under conditions in which they cannot live—forces them through the strong arm of the law, to remain in such conditions until that death ensues which is the inevitable consequence—knows that the thousands of victims must perish, and yet permits these conditions to remain, its deed is murder just as surely as the deed of a single individual; disguised, malicious murder, murder against which no one can defend himself, which does not seem what it is, because no man sees

the murder, because the death of the victim seems a natural one, since the offence is more one of omission than of commission. But murder it remains. (Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, 1845)

The piecework process, never mind the shoddy equipment we are forced to use, is at the heart of why we have lost four people gruesomely in two decades. The demand to produce more for less and with less cannot be overstated here as the underlying cause. We note that even as the current union executive chortles about its “accomplishments” last year as an outcome of the strike in its reelection pamphlets, the piecework issue hangs over our heads.

The piecework issue is at the heart of Aziz’s profits and that is why he threatens a lengthy strike if we push him on it. A lengthy strike is something no one wants, not because we think it isn’t necessary, but because we know from recent experience that the USW will do everything it can to either sell us out or starve us out.

The USW will also shy away from a direct conflict with National Steel Car, of which it is the junior partner in the profit game, and with the political establishment in Ontario and federally, which enforces the brutal profit-driven economic system and backs NSC management to the hilt as it exploits us.

Doug Ford’s hard-right Conservative government has sent inspectors to our plant who took no action in spite of hundreds of visits in the years leading up to the recent spate of deaths. The USW, like the rest of the union bureaucracy, is in bed with the Trudeau Liberals, who with their New Democrat supporters in parliament think that society’s resources are best used arming the military to wage war around the world rather than investing in workplace safety and social services.

Mourning our lost friends and coworkers is important. Understanding and assimilating the class issues underlying why those deaths happened, and the necessity for an independent political struggle, which is the basis of this committee is even more important. Because once we do that, we are armed with the knowledge to put an end to the system that causes that unnecessary loss of life in the pursuit of profit. Anything less than that is, as we said, performative.

If you agree with this position on the National Day of Mourning, and other subjects we’ve written on, join us and help grow this committee into a pole of opposition against the malign neglect of National Steel Car, the support it receives from the political establishment, and the treachery of the United Steelworkers. If you want to hear a REAL discussion on the program workers in Canada and internationally need to fight back against ruthless capitalist exploitation and imperialist war, sign up here for the International Committee of the Fourth International’s International May Day online rally on Saturday, May 4 at 3 p.m. Eastern time.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact