

International working class unity, not the USW's support for tariffs and nationalist warmongering, can defend our jobs at National Steel Car!

National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee
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The following statement was sent to the World Socialist Web Site by the National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee (NSCRFC), which represents militant workers at National Steel Car, whose Hamilton, Ontario plant is one of North America's largest producers of rail cars.

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 Brothers and Sisters,

We know workers at National Steel Car are going through a rough time right now. These massive layoffs, affecting some 1,200 workers or approximately three-quarters of our workforce, are happening at the worst possible time and are obviously causing a lot of stress. We have been there and we understand.

However, some things need to be clarified, so that we all understand what is really going on. A recent supplemental newsletter was handed out by the United Steelworkers (USW) Local 7135 executive. While it had important information on SUB pay, benefits, tool and equipment return, etc., there was something in the very first sentence that needs to be addressed. It stated, "Unfortunately National Steel Car is experiencing a downturn in the market."

This is a superficial and deliberately insufficient explanation. "Downturn in the market" could include anything that relates to a diminishing of the construction of railcars within North America's capitalist economy.

On the website Progressive Railroad, Richard Kloster tells a different story. Kloster has been predicting freight railcar production across North America for a while now and is pretty good at being close on his estimates. He is predicting total railcar output to be up to 38,749 cars for the entire continent in 2025.

This is down from his prediction of approximately 41,000 and 43,000 cars produced for 2024, but such a reduction in output should not have triggered over 1,200 layoffs right before Christmas. We also know, as does the Local 7135 executive, that before November 5, 2024, there were potential orders on the books (although not signed) that would have maintained employment levels as they were at the end of October.

What happened?

On November 5, Donald Trump was elected president of the United States and the potential of 25 percent tariffs against imports from Canada became a real possibility. This has thrown many things, as it relates to industrial production on the continent (including railcar production), into

chaos.

No one really knows what will happen until Trump is inaugurated on January 20, 2025. However, he has pledged more than once to enforce the 25 percent tariff on "Day One," and reiterated and amplified such threats this week. We know that NSC has at least three signed orders, but call-backs for those probably won't start until the end of January or the middle of February due to the lead time needed to acquire materials.

Why was the Local 7135 executive reluctant to call out what is clearly going on in the supplemental update? We think it is because the USW apparatus, like all other union bureaucracies, is seeking a corporatist accommodation with Trump and is a vehement supporter of economic tariffs in support of the agenda of the economic and military warfare waged by North America's twin imperialist powers—the US and Canada—against their global rivals.

At the "international" level, the United Steelworkers President David McCall (upwards of \$290,000 USD a year salary) and United Steelworkers National Director Marty Warren (upwards of \$230,000 USD a year salary) stated on November 26, as it relates to the potential of 25 percent tariffs, "If applied, these extraordinary tariffs levelled on Canada would dramatically harm workers in both our countries. There is no question we must address the holes in our global trading system, but Canada is not the problem."

For his part, Warren said, "There is absolutely no doubt that working families are the first to get hurt by unfair trading practices, including global overcapacity in key sectors. The answer, however, is to work together as allies on sensible trade policies that will allow us to contain bad actors like China." In other words, the USW bureaucracy has no problem with tariffs and economic warfare in alliance with the would-be Führer Trump, just so long as they are directed against someone else, and specifically workers in other countries.

What we are seeing in real time are the consequences of the dead end of economic nationalism and the pro-nationalist, pro-capitalist, and frankly pro-military grovelling nature of the labour bureaucrats. We have discussed the nationalistic nature of the USW bureaucracy before, but this latest development lays it bare for all to see.

While attempting to ease concerns over tariffs, the USW bureaucracy wants to use flag-waving and militarism to justify a Canadian exemption for these tariffs. The USW bureaucrats' claim that "Canada is a unique national security partner" of Washington shows where the USW is going, in terms of how it will approach this. To "save jobs" in Canada, it will tout the production of steel and products made with steel, continent-wide, as essential to the arming of the US-NATO war machine, which is being readied by the imperialists in Washington, Ottawa and across Europe to

wage World War III.

That is to say, and it's spelled out in the Nov. 26 statement, the USW wants to keep the Canadian and US economies deeply integrated within that militaristic, capitalist framework. The USW is not opposed to tariffs (another name for taxes to be paid by the working class in both countries), so long as it maintains industries they are organized in (see: dues) and so long as it serves the interest of "national security."

Former USW President Leo Girard made this case in 2018 as it related to Trump's tariffs on aluminum and steel. It needs to be said that these protectionist ideas never end well for workers as prices always go up, while our wages do not. Tariffs also have a long history of inflaming economic tensions that end in war.

So much for Trump being the "anti-war" candidate. Another issue that the economic nationalists of the political establishment and labour bureaucracies need to answer, and this is not just in relation to railcar production, is: What precisely is a US/Canadian/Mexican/etc. product?

Just looking recently at the rail cars built all over the plant, we see parts from Mexico, the US, China, Canada, and steel from all over Eastern Europe all coming together in a railcar built and assembled in Hamilton, Ontario. The device you are reading this on has minerals and elements traced from a few continents on the planet, built in Taiwan, China, Vietnam, Korea, and shipped all over the world for sale to the consumer. Not exactly a product native to any specific country.

And for those reading this who think these tariffs are designed to "bring back jobs to the US" and that we should do the same thing here, a few things need to be stated bluntly. It's impossible to defend jobs and workers' rights and wages on a national basis under conditions where the production process has been globalized over the past four decades. The ruling class scours the globe to find the cheapest commodities for its operations, including labour power. If we want to defend jobs, we, the workers, must advance a global strategy that corresponds to the realities of daily economic life.

The last four decades of social misery have been the ruling elite's reaction to the decades in the mid-20th century, when they were forced to make concessions to us within a national economic framework due to our militant struggles and because they feared the emergence of a revolutionary movement like the one in Russia in 1917. They always deemed us, the working class, "unworthy" of these concessions, which they worked to take back at the first available opportunity.

Revolutionary developments in technology, such as the emergence of the microchip and the advent of containerized shipping, allowed transnational corporations to offshore production beginning in the 1980s. The unions, rooted in the capitalist nation-state and viciously hostile to socialism, could do nothing against this onslaught. In short order, the bureaucrats in unions across the world transformed themselves from workers' organizations that could achieve limited reforms, to open partners of corporate management and the state.

The right-wing bureaucrats that lead the unions constantly argue that the ruling class can voluntarily return to a "national" form of socioeconomic development they have spent five decades deliberately escaping from. You may as well ask water to run uphill against gravity because the results will be the same. Some companies may return based on massive government subsidies and tax breaks, but those high paying jobs of yesteryear will not. The corporations, profit centres of the ruling class, will continue to scour the world and employ emerging technologies—that could be used to provide us improved living standards, a shorter work-week, and eliminate the type of dangerous, sweatshop conditions that exist at NSC and many other companies—to lower their labour costs and increase their profits.

What we are up against is this: an antiquated nation-state system that has long since served any progressive purpose, coming up against the private control and ownership of a globally interconnected economy. US

imperialism, a dying superpower with Canadian imperialism in tow, is in its death throes attacking anyone and anything to maintain its fading global dominance. The nationalistic and pro-capitalist union bureaucracies fulfill an important role in keeping the working class tied to this dying system.

What is the way out of this?

Firstly, the working class must understand that it is an international class, connected by the process of production and similar living conditions. Even more than 25 years ago, the working class spans the entire globe, facing the same class enemy in the capitalist ruling class and their lapdogs in the social democratic parties, like the NDP, and union bureaucracies. This global interconnectedness speaks to the need to unite our struggles across national boundaries, with a common political perspective and program of socialist internationalism.

Workers must understand the class nature of the union bureaucracies and what their purpose is. It is not to "protect the working class" or "raise the living standards of their members." The purpose of the labour bureaucracies is to maintain their "seat at the table" and remain a useful appendage of the ruling class they truly work for.

They may harken back to the era when the unions were associated with important, but limited gains for workers within national economies (the mid-1930s to the end of the 1970s), like the photos we saw in the calendar our executive handed out before the holidays. They do this to claim they are exactly what they were during that period.

But we all know that is not the case—and we've had one concession contract after another that shows that. Since the late 1970s to the present period, all the bureaucracies of the AFL-CIO and CLC unions have transformed themselves into junior partners in the corporate capitalist profit game and become a corporate police force. To conceal this reality, they resort to empty nationalism and militarism to obscure the essential class nature of their existence now. Their unstated purpose is to keep us in line to maintain the profits of their ruling class paymasters, and help them advance their predatory interests on the world stage.

Why else would the various unions (CUPE, the Teamsters, Unifor etc.) constantly collaborate with the federal government to impose pro-employer contract demands through open strikebreaking and an entirely pro-employer arbitration process, as just happened to the Canada Post workers? Why else would the USW "leadership" resort to mimicking the economic and military sabre-rattling demands of the American and Canadian ruling class as it relates to China?

The working class in North America has no interest in a massive global military conflagration to maintain its "jobs." We know we would end up being cannon fodder for the 1 percent and, assuming there was a planet left to rebuild, have to work under them all over again.

We have occasionally heard how the collaboration of unions in Germany is a much better set up. Union bureaucrats there sit on corporate boards and have a serious role in the directions of companies. However, Volkswagen recently announced layoffs where one in four jobs will be destroyed at VW (a total of 35,000) and tens of thousands of spin-off jobs in related industries.

All the while the IG Metall union, which boasts that it's the largest union in the world, claims this is a "Christmas miracle" and was on the inside going along with these decisions. If that is not Exhibit A that these bureaucracies are in the business of keeping corporations profitable at the expense of its members and the society at large, what is? With trade union "friends" like this, who needs enemies?

The working class must gain the consciousness of its own power within

this system to end this system. It must break with the AFL-CIO and CLC labour bureaucracies that keep us tied to the system of profit, and use nationalism to divide the working class and prepare the ground for another world war.

It must realize this needs to be done internationally, because the ruling class organizes production internationally and pursues its global interests on the basis of a global strategy. That is where the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees comes into play as the spearhead organization to make this a reality and that's why the National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee is affiliated to it. We encourage all National Steel Car workers who agree with us to contact the Committee and build it as the organization we need to defend our livelihoods.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact