Why we oppose tariffs and the USW's nationalism: Unite workers globally to defend the jobs and rights of *all*!

National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee
13 May 2025

The following statement was submitted by the National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee, which was established by workers at the National Steel Car plant in Hamilton, Ontario, during their 2023 strike to represent the interests of workers on the shop floor in opposition to the nationalist, pro-capitalist leadership of the United Steelworkers' (USW) union. To contact the committee, fill out the form at the end of this article.

Brothers and Sisters:

It's good to see that almost everyone is now back at work. Being laid off is always nerve racking, and all the more so in these turbulent economic times. However, it is necessary to take stock of things and try to understand what exactly has happened and why.

Behind the layoffs at National Steel Car

The most recent problems started at the end of November, when the mass layoffs began and National Steel Car did not provide the required Record of Employment to Service Canada so that workers could receive EI benefits. This meant those who were laid off had to wait up to 6 weeks to receive any money they were entitled to. This was a nice little Christmas "present" NSC gave us. To compound the wonderfulness of the festive season, workers who were laid off as of December 20, 2024, did not receive pay for Christmas Day, Boxing Day, and New Year's Day. This was due to NSC's sneaky use of the language in article 11.03 of the Collective Bargaining Agreement that the union previously agreed to.

After some wrangling by the union executive, NSC admitted that the layoffs were due to the loss of orders from Trump's, since realized, tariff threats. Once members started to get called back, NSC's money-grubbing nature came back in full force. The piecework "incentive" issue reared its ugly head once again. Workers in P1 (Production Line 1) were working for over 8 to 9 weeks without making their "incentive" rate. NSC claimed that there were "too many men on the job" even though the prescribed 3 railcars per shift was met. Then the line went to two shifts and NSC took men away from P1 to provide for the 2nd shift, yet maintained its demand for 3 cars! This was an impossibility due to the time needed in several positions to produce, never mind the bottlenecks at those positions. This is why the current union president had to call NSC management either "incompetent or manipulative" in the last union newsletter.

We contend it can be both simultaneously. More fundamentally, it raises the urgent necessity for the ending of piecework and bringing our standard pay up to that "incentive" rate. If that were so, NSC could not take money away from us that we earned, and pocket it for themselves.

Of course, what was not officially highlighted during all of this was the looming tariffs and trade war, which have now become a reality. Trump's far-right administration has imposed 25 percent tariffs on all steel and aluminum imports into the US, and has lifted but continues to threaten 25 percent tariffs on all imports from Canada and Mexico, America's supposed free trade partners.

The Canadian ruling class has responded with a filthy nationalist campaign and tariffs of its own.

Trade war, militarism and capitalist crisis

Why is the United States acting in this fashion?

Since the beginning of the 1970s, US capitalism has suffered an accelerating decline in its global economic power. Washington and Wall Street have sought to offset this decline and maximize their profits through an ever-escalating assault on the working class, including massive job cuts and the dismantling of public services, and by resorting to wars of aggression around the world.

Now, under Trump, it is trying to restructure the world economy and redraw the map of the world to ensure that US imperialism dominates in the high-tech industries of the future (AI, electrical vehicles, robotics, etc.) and has the military power to subjugate its rivals, above all China and Russia. Washington wants to seize or secure US capitalist control over markets, "critical minerals" and other natural resources, pools of labour to exploit and strategic territories, through both economic and military might.

Trump's tariffs are a key element in this. Two of their key aims are thwarting China's ability to produce high-tech goods and repatriating industries to the home front in preparation for wartime production. This is what's behind Trump's demand for companies to produce in the US. Either industries return to the US and produce there and/or countries capitulate under economic stress to get the same effect. This is also what's behind Trump's vow to use "economic" force to make Canada the 51st US state.

In Canada, the economic pain from tariffs has already been felt, as we can attest to. However, the ruling class tries to claim "we are all in this together." We are told that collectively, as a populace, we all should be "elbows up" and share the burden together. Apparently, the class interests of Galen Weston, David Thompson, Mark Carney, Pierre Poilievre and Greg Aziz are the same as those of the workers at National Steel Car and throughout other industries!

What the ruling class in this country is really perturbed about is that Washington under Trump refuses to recognize Ottawa as its junior partner so that North America's two imperialist powers can plunder the world side-by-side. Canada's elite wants a deal with Trump to reestablish this arrangement, which Canadian capitalism has relied on for over eight decades to advance its global interests. Through its various media outlets and usual political mouthpieces, the Canadian ruling class is attempting to

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chloroform the working class through silly slogans and reactionary nationalist jingoism. The purpose of this is to conceal the fact that workers in Canada will be forced to pay for the tariff war if the ruling class gets its way, while it attempts to cut a deal with Trump to better position itself in the imperialist plunder game.

What is the role of the trade unions?

The unions are playing a particularly critical role in this process by diverting workers' attention with economic nationalism, empty-headed flag waving, and bellicose demands for retaliatory tariffs, whose principal victims will be our fellow workers in the US.

In the US, United Auto Workers (UAW) President Shawn Fain has openly sided with Trump on the tariff issue, lyingly claiming that they aim to protect American autoworker jobs. The fact of the matter, as any autoworker can well explain, is that the auto industry is based on a global division of labour and production network that sees components shipped across multiple borders during the production process. Teamsters President Sean O'Brien has also openly sided with Trump, to the point of speaking at the Republican National Convention last summer.

Canada's union leaders are a mirror image of their US counterparts. Lana Payne, Unifor's national president, is a leading member of the Prime Minister's Advisory Council on Canada-US Trade and spews the same nationalist rhetoric as Fain and O'Brien, but from the Canadian side. Our union, the United Steelworkers, is also doing the same thing on both sides of the border but within itself! Unlike Unifor or the UAW, the USW is still, nominally at least, an international union with sizable locals on both sides of the border.

Canadian Director Marty Warren stated on March 11 regarding Trump's steel and aluminum tariffs:

> Our government must fight back with the same force. Workers are the backbone of these industries and our first priority must be ensuring they have the support they need. This means real protections—a wage subsidy [workers' tax dollars given to profitable corporations to subsidize lost wages] and enhanced Employment Insurance. Canada must also prioritize procurement and invest in the future of our steel and aluminum industries. No more half measures. No more waiting. Workers deserve real protection and they need it now.

The press release goes on to say, "The USW is also demanding the federal government must expand and enforce retaliatory tariffs on US imports, targeting key industries and politically sensitive sectors, and implement a robust 'Buy Canadian' for all public infrastructure projects, ensuring public dollars support domestic jobs…"

The absurdity of such rhetoric is clear if one examines the history of the USW. It has been complicit over the last 45 years in the decimation of workers' jobs on both sides of the border in the steel industry it claims to support. Now, it is in bed with the very government and political parties that oversaw this process, and is demanding that they take action to defend workers' jobs!

Even our USW Local 7135 President, Frank Crowder, has got in on the flag-waving action. His own Facebook page profile photo has an "Elbows up" baseball cap. In the video embedded in this CBC report, he can be seen correctly addressing the fear and uncertainty facing all of us. But at the end of the interview, Mr. Crowder can be seen parroting the same nationalistic language as Warren, that only serves to pit workers against one another along national lines and bind us to "our" capitalists and their representatives in the parliamentary parties.

From the US side, USW International President Dave McCall responded to Trump's April 2 imposition of global "reciprocal" tariffs with a press release titled "Tariffs Must be Paired with Wider Trade Policy Reform." It read in part:

> Our union has been on the front lines for fair trade for decades as flawed trade agreements and other policies robbed workers of their jobs and deprived our nation of critical capabilities across key sectors. Used strategically, tariffs are a crucial means of reining in bad actors who view access to the US market as a right, not a privilege. Today's announcement helps send the message to our trading partners that they must earn that right. Tariffs, however, are only one of the many tools we need to promote fair trade and reverse outsourcing and offshoring jobs. First and foremost, we must ensure our trade policy targets cheaters rather than trusted economic allies like Canada. We should be working to build relationships—not barriers—with partners who have proven their commitment to joining us in tackling over capacity…

Mr. McCall's call for a carve out for Canada has nothing to do with defending the interests of workers. Rather it is an attempt to curry favour with the Trump regime as it relates to ensuring that America has the materials it needs to build the equipment the US military requires. In our last statement, we explained how the USW has advocated for a tariff exemption for Canadian-made steel and aluminum going back to the last Trump presidency, on the grounds that they are vital to the building of US warplanes, tanks and other armaments, and that Ottawa and Washington should be allying to take on the real "enemy," China. This is also the view of Prime Minister Carney, the Conservatives' Poilievre, and Ontario's Doug Ford, who has made an anti-China Fortress North America or "Fortress Am-Can" his battle-cry.

The USW International's call for a Canadian exemption is also aimed at preserving the unity of the union apparatus and its continued access to the dues income supplied by workers on both sides of the border.

Above all, the Steelworker bureaucrats on both sides of the border vehemently oppose a joint struggle of workers in Canada, the US and Mexico against the tariff war and the governments that are waging it. They are hostile to the forging of unity with workers in China and around the world to defend the jobs and rights of ***all*** workers, to oppose imperialist war, and halt the evisceration of public services and social supports to pay for rearmament and military aggression.

Why we must oppose the pro-capitalist and nationalist unions

It's important to understand in this period of economic decline, that is to say, capitalism rotting on its feet, why the unions start to cling to the apparatus of the state in such a clear fashion. It goes to the trade union bureaucracies and their class character. They all—the UAW, Teamsters, Unifor, United Steelworkers—base themselves on a program of nationalism and the maintenance of the system of profit, i.e., capitalism. But under conditions in which all capitalist powers are rearming for world war and turning to authoritarian forms of rule, there is no room for even the most limited democracy in organizations that base themselves on the capitalist framework. This quote from the great socialist-internationalist Leon

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Trotsky, written 85 years ago as the Second World War erupted, says it as succinctly as possible: “There is one common feature in the development, or more correctly the degeneration, of modern trade union organizations in the entire world: it is their drawing closely to and drawing together with the state power.” (Leon Trotsky, “Trade unions in the epoch of imperialist decay.”)

For our part, the National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee argues that the only viable response is for workers to build organizations of class struggle that correspond to their position as a class objectively unified across national borders by the process of production. And these organizations must decisively reject capitalist private profit in favour of the prioritization of the social needs of the vast majority, including decent-paying, secure jobs for all, well-funded public services, and workers’ control over production. The only organization leading the struggle for this type of movement is the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, to which our committee has been affiliated since its founding almost two years ago.

We have noticed the recent protests in the US against Trump’s drive to establish a dictatorship. This is a positive and important step in fighting back. However, it will be necessary for those protests to make a complete break from the Democratic Party and its defenders in the union bureaucracies, as well as pseudo-left organizations like the Democratic Socialists of America. This applies to us in Canada. We also must make a complete break from the capitalist political parties like the Liberals and NDP that claim to be for “working families,” the union bureaucracies that attempt to rope us back into voting for the very political parties that want us to pay for the trade war and rearmament in preparation for imperialist world war, and their pseudo-left appendages, who use “revolutionary” rhetoric while propping up the authority of the pro-capitalist and nationalist trade unions.

Once that break is made, working people must link up internationally to deal with what is obviously an international struggle. It is that class independence that is the only way out now. Staying subordinated to the “accepted” organizations of the past will only keep us trapped, on both sides of the border, in nationalist silos and tied to the very system that is driving us to desperation. The only way to defeat what amounts to a burgeoning international fascist movement that is intent on forcing all of us into subservience, poverty, and, world war is to fight back with an internationalist program of working class solidarity, defence of democratic rights, and taking back the wealth that has essentially been stolen from us and monopolized in the hands of a financial oligarchy, so it can be used to meet burning social needs. That is the underlying motivation in why the National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee was formed and why we feel it’s important to tell the truth about why we are in the situation we are in.

We urge you to contact our committee using the form below if you have any questions or want to get involved.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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