Build rank-and-file power at National Steel Car in opposition to the nationalist, corporatist USW apparatus!

A member of the National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee
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Contact the National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee at nscrfc@gmail.com or by filling out the form at the end of this article.

Brothers and Sisters,

Our contract struggle is at a crucial stage, with the expiration date less than three weeks away on August 8. We're fighting against a ruthless employer that has presided over dangerous working conditions in our Hamilton, Ontario plant, resulting in the deaths of three workers within less than two years from late 2020 to June 2022. Problems with equipment and the very structure of our building are combined with the constant pressure associated with the "incentive" system, another name for piecework.

The conditions we're fighting against are not unique to our plant. Manufacturing and industrial workers across the North American continent confront the same onslaught on their conditions, pay and jobs—whether it's autoworkers on layoff due to Trump's trade war and the Canadian ruling elite's nationalist retaliatory response, or postal workers facing the demolition of Canada Post as a public service.

We could find powerful allies in our struggle for decent-paying jobs and safe working conditions if we fight to link up with other sections of workers in a mass mobilization against corporate profiteering, government-enabled violations of worker rights and health and environmental regulations, and the dismantling of public services.

The main obstacle we have to deal with in taking forward our fight is the United Steelworkers (USW) bureaucracy. The nationalist, pro-capitalist USW apparatus has enforced round after round of concessions on us and wants to do the same again this year. Like all of the trade union bureaucracies in Canada and the US, they prioritize their close working relationships with their respective governments and the corporate bosses.

To understand why this is so and advance an alternative program based on the independent political power of workers on the shop floor in alliance with our brothers and sisters across Canada, the US and beyond through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, we must examine the history of the USW and its nationalist, anti-worker record.

Where does the United Steelworkers come from and what happened to those who built it?

The United Steelworkers of America (the present-day USW) emerged out of the mass movement for industrial unionism that erupted amid the bitter privations of the Great Depression. This movement—which saw the organization of steel, auto, rubber, electrical and other industries under the banner of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO)—overcame the furious resistance of the employers and the state to worker organization through militant struggle. This included defying company goons and court injunctions, and employing new class-struggle methods like the sit-down strike and the flying picket.

It also involved a rebellion against the American Federation of Labour (AFL) and its Canadian counterpart, the Trades and Labour Congress. These craft-based union federations were led by a conservative bureaucracy that excluded the vast majority of workers, whom they deemed "unskilled" and "unworthy."

The mass movement for industrial unionism was initiated by American workers, but workers in Canada rallied to support the CIO, because they recognized that they were fighting a common struggle, often against the very same giant corporations.

Socialist-minded workers played a catalyzing role in a wave of struggles that preceded the CIO's launch and the sit-down strikes that followed. This is exemplified by the leading role played by the Trotskyist movement in the Minneapolis general strike of 1934.

The Steelworkers Organizing Committee (SWOC) the predecessor of the USWA/USW was a component part of the CIO from its founding in 1935.

However, the leadership of the SWOC was dominated, from its inception, by a right-wing, pro-capitalist bureaucratic layer that had ties to the Catholic Church and the Democratic Party in the United States. Moreover, the CIO leadership, joined by the Stalinist Communist Party, blocked the working-class industrial offensive from becoming a political challenge to capitalism, that is the subordination of all socioeconomic life to the profit drive of a clique of bankers and factory owners.

Subsequently, during the "Red Scare" of the late 1940s and early 1950s, the conservative union leadership connived with powerful sections of the ruling class that were witch-hunting left-wing figures in all areas of social and political life to drive out the socialist militants who built the unions. That is to say, this bureaucratic layer purged the unions of the very ideas and people the bosses feared! This paved the way for the CIO to merge with the AFL in 1955 and bury the class struggle tradition that the industrial unions were founded on under a pile of pro-capitalist, nationalist, anti-communist, bureaucratic conservatism.

In Canada in particular, these developments coincided with the establishment of the pro-employer "collective bargaining" system. In exchange for union recognition, it requires the union apparatus to suppress all strikes and worker job-action, unless expressly sanctioned by the state (i.e., after a contract has expired and the union has passed through conciliation and other hoops designed to frustrate worker action.)

For a period from the late 1940s to the early 1970s, workers were able to obtain significant concessions from the ruling class by waging militant

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and determined struggles through these industrial unions (the USW, UAW, CWA, etc.). These gains were thanks above all to the temporary restabilization of capitalism after World War II, which meant the bosses and governments could afford to concede improved living standards and conditions to workers in order to prevent more radical opposition emerging to their social order.

Our city has a long tradition of heroic workers' struggles during this period. At Stelco in Hamilton, there was the famous 82-day strike in 1946, not only for union recognition, but for basic things that until recently we took for granted, such as the 40-hour work week and increases in pay. This was followed by the 86-day strike in 1958; a wildcat strike in 1966 against not only the company but the USW Local 1005 leadership; an 80-day strike in 1969; and a 125-day strike in 1981.

It was during this period that USW Local 7135 at National Steel Car was formed in 1967.

All of this changed in the mid-1970s and early 1980s. A global crisis in capitalism had arrived, marked by rampant inflation, growing international competition and falling profit rates. With the Volcker interest rate shock of 1979-1980 that deliberately induced a recession, and the Reagan administration's firing of the PATCO air traffic controllers union of 1981, the American ruling class declared war on the working class. The response of the union bureaucracy was to shift sharply to the right. Contract-reopenings and concessions became the order of the day. The entire AFL-CIO, including the USW, refused to organize a single solidarity strike in support of the fired PATCO workers.

In Canada, the Pierre-Elliot Trudeau Liberal government imposed three years of wage controls from 1975. When the postal workers' union defied a government back-to-work order in 1978, Trudeau threatened to fire postal workers en masse and the Liberal government ordered the arrest and imprisonment of the union's leader, Jean-Claude Parrot, to demonstrate that the Canadian ruling class was shifting, like its US counterpart, towards a counteroffensive against the working class aimed at clawing back all the concessions it had been compelled to make following the war.

The socioeconomic conditions that had enabled the USW and other labour bureaucracies to maintain "labour peace" while rank-and-file workers obtained limited gains had come to an abrupt end. Technological advances enabled a fundamental change in the production process, creating for the first time companies engaged in globalized production that cut the ground from under the nationalist foundations that the trade unions always rested upon. The bureaucrats responded by embracing corporatism and doubling down on nationalism. In the years to come, they would integrate the union apparatuses ever more completely with management and the capitalist state, becoming the enforcers of concessions and austerity on the working class.

From "Remember Pearl Harbour" to "Buy Canadian"

During the 1980s, the USW's nationalist-corporatist character came to the fore. Corporatist union-management collaboration, based on the insistence that workers must tie their fortune to the unconditional defence of "their own" corporations against their global competitors, became a major feature of the unions' program.

The USW promoted national chauvinism and "Buy American" campaigns, including anti-Japanese bumper stickers carrying the slogan "Remember Pearl Harbour." This foul nationalism was the ideological form of the USW's class collaboration—its chosen weapon for obscuring from workers the fact that it had become, in practice, an industrial police force for management.

Meanwhile, the betrayals continued and accumulated. At Phelps Dodge in 1983, nearly 3,000 miners represented by the USW were on strike for three years against concessions, enduring police and National Guard repression. The USW International refused sympathy strikes and meaningful financial support, and even attempted to bribe the strike leader Jorge O'Leary with $175,000 to call off the strike. When O'Leary refused and asked for the money to go into the strike fund, the USW kept the cash. The strike was crushed.

In 1985-86, the USW abandoned pattern bargaining in the steel industry and isolated and sold out bitter struggles at Wheeling-Pittsburgh Steel and USX in Pittsburgh. At USX, after the longest lockout in the history of the steel industry—184 days—the USW agreed to a $2.50 an hour wage cut and nearly 1,400 layoffs.

Steel employment in the US collapsed from 453,000 workers in 1979 to 168,000 in 1995.

This process was mirrored at Stelco in Hamilton during the same time period. In 1981, at the end of the 125-day strike, employment stood at 26,000 workers across all company operations. A significant portion of these were at Hamilton's Hilton Works, which employed about 13,000 workers. By the end of the 90-day strike in 1990, USW Local 1005 represented about 10,000 workers at Hilton Works.

The collapse in steel employment was driven both by the globalization of production and the capitalists' use of new technologies to ratchet up exploitation. Global production networks allowed corporations to outsource production to wherever labour costs were cheapest and business regulations most lax. The subordination of the latest technological developments to the accumulation of private profit meant that, rather than being used to lighten workers' workloads with no loss of pay, new advances were deployed to accelerate speed-up and slash jobs.

In the 1990s and 2000s, the USW actively collaborated with Wall Street vulture capitalists—most infamously, billionaire Wilbur Ross, later Trump's commerce secretary—to restructure the steel industry on the backs of workers and retirees. The USW hired investment banker Ron Bloom in 1996 specifically to work with management on "competitiveness," which in practice meant overseeing layoffs, pension cuts, and health care elimination for thousands of workers and retirees.

The union bureaucracy won its reward: control of billions of dollars in the Voluntary Employee Beneficiary Association (VEBA), which transformed union officials into wealth managers with a direct material stake in the stock market. During this period, the number of steelworkers in the US fell by 65 percent between 1979 and 2019, yet the USW's total assets rose six-fold to over $1.5 billion. By 2025, they had grown to over $2 billion.

The USW's bogus "internationalism"

The USW bills itself as an "international" union because it represents workers on both sides of the US-Canada border. In reality, the USW separates contract struggles by workers in Canada from those of their colleagues south of the border, even under conditions where production chains directly link Canadian and US facilities and a common fight would increase workers' leverage to push for immediate economic demands. The division of Canadian and US workers in every contract struggle is enforced just as ferociously as the isolation of each workers' struggle to their own work site within Canada itself.

There is no clearer exposure of the Steelworkers' fraudulent "internationalism" than its role as one of the most aggressive promoters of nationalism in each country. In Canada, the USW has consistently collaborated with the Trudeau-Carney federal Liberal government, the

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Ontario Tory Doug Ford and other right-wing premiers to whip up “Team Canada” sentiment against the trade war initiated by US President Donald Trump last year.

Behind a crescendo of Canadian nationalist “Team Canada,” “we’re all in it together” tub-thumping and with the support of their Steelworker, CLC and Unifor partners, the Carney government and ruling class are implementing Trump-like policies. This includes massive military spending increases to be paid for through an austerity drive targeting public services and the workers who administer them, and a massive assault on workers’ right to strike.

As for Ottawa’s USW Canada-supported retaliatory tariffs, they are aimed at protecting the interests of Canadian capital at the expense of workers on both sides of the border. They have accelerated the jobs massacre across industries triggered by the trade war and punished workers on both sides of the border with price rises.

USW President Marty Warren has joined with Unifor’s President Lana Payne to demand an “industrial strategy” including “Buy Canadian” mandates —explicitly targeting Chinese workers, who are among the most exploited on earth, and who are the target of US and Canadian war preparations.

The USW has long been an open promoter of US and Canadian imperialist war preparations against China. As early as 2016, USW President Leo Gerard testified before Congress that “manufacturing, and the critical steel sector, is vital to America’s national and economic security,” calling protectionist measures essential to US “warfighters.” Gerard was delivering this testimony side-by-side with the very executives who were simultaneously demanding sweeping wage concessions and destroying thousands of jobs. The only criticism the USW has made of “America First” tariffs against Canada is that they are short-sighted, because Canadian steel and raw materials are crucial for US fighter jets and other military equipment. In other words, they advocate a “Fortress North America” with the belief that this is a more effective way to organize the continent to fight another world war.

The USW’s role at ATI Specialty Materials in 2025 illustrates the same pattern with brutal clarity. While ATI posted record profits and stock values had risen over 500 percent since 2016, the USW pushed through a six-year concessions-laden deal, keeping workers on the job without a strike. A USW statement welcomed Trump’s effort “to contain global overcapacity” while its members faced wages ravaged by inflation and gutted pensions.

The impact of the USW’s nationalism and corporatism at National Steel Car

Workers at NSC have experienced some of the most disastrous consequences of the USW’s nationalist, corporatist record. The industrial murders of Fraser Cowan, Collin Grayley, and Quoc Le between 2020 and 2022 resulted in a grand total of $650,000 in fines and not a single criminal prosecution. The root cause of their deaths is brutal capitalist exploitation aimed at maximizing corporate profit, expressed most brazenly in the barbaric piecework system that drives us to sacrifice our safety for extra pay.

The USW and Local 7135 executives’ response, however, was to insist that the proper channel for redress was through the courts. These are the same courts that allowed Greg Aziz to pay a mere $650,000 for his role in snuffing out three lives and, more generally, have given their legal stamp of approval to rampant business deregulation and dangerous working conditions for decades. In the 2023 contract fight, the union prepared to accept below-inflation-level wage increases of 2 to 2.5 percent—a real wage cut—until we stood up at the mass meeting and pushed back.

Local 7135 president Frank Crowder in the January 2026 newsletter essentially announced the same approach for the upcoming August contract: measuring wage increases against the Consumer Price Index, which excludes food and energy—the very costs most devastating to workers earning the modest wage of $55,000 to $75,000 a year.

As we are now experiencing firsthand, the company has maneuvered to drain workers’ savings through an early summer shutdown before the August 8 contract expiration, hoping financial desperation will force an early capitulation. The union is following this script: protecting the legal framework, protecting the “bargaining process,” and, in so doing, protecting Greg Aziz’s profits.

We face a political struggle

The USW is not a “broken union” that can change if the “correct leadership is elected.” Its apparatus is comprised of a caste of high-paid functionaries with interests different and opposed to the workers they claim to represent. The government has skewed the collective bargaining system in favour of the bosses, but the USW bureaucrats insist workers must remain straitjacketed within it, because it upholds the bureaucracy’s privileges.

The USW’s nationalism and corporatism are not aberrations produced by corrupt individuals. The claim that the trade unions are fine just the way they are, if only the current “poor” leadership were replaced with a more militant one is a completely misguided position. The current AFL-CIO-CLC trade union apparatus and bureaucracy rest on a definite social and political perspective: the acceptance of capitalism and the framework of the nation-state. Any attempt to “reform” the union apparatus while leaving the foundation intact will reproduce the same results. The officials will change, their function will not.

This is why our fight for rank-and-file committees—specifically their development as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC)—is not merely a tactical proposal for better contract negotiations. It’s a political question about who controls the struggle and to what ends.

Rank-and-file committees are the organizational form through which workers can begin to exercise independent class power—to break with the pro-employer “collective bargaining” framework that as our May 2026 statement rightly identifies, exists not to protect workers but to protect capital and keep workers under the thumb of the bureaucracies that police them.

For us at National Steel Car, this means understanding our contract fight as a political struggle, not just an economic one. The demand for a 25 percent wage increase to offset decades of real wage cuts, the abolition of piecework without any reduction in take-home pay (something the USW Local 7135 leadership has failed to call for, let alone fight for), and the end to speed-up are correct and necessary demands.

But we can only achieve them if we fight for a broader perspective. When the union tells workers that the company’s “profitability” sets limits on what is possible, the rank-and-file committee must answer: we reject profitability as the criterion for what we need. National Steel Car is a profitable enterprise that continues to augment Greg Aziz’s fortune and workers can and must be paid accordingly, fully, and safely. The safety of every worker should take priority over corporate profits.

When the union and the Canadian government tell workers to rally behind “Buy Canadian” and trade-war nationalism, the committee must answer: our allies are in the US, in Mexico, and in China—the workers making steel, making rail cars, building the material infrastructure of

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society everywhere.

When Trump's war on Iran drives up food and energy costs and hammers the global economy, the committee must answer: this is capitalism's logic. Production for profit and war, not for human need. The only lasting answer is the socialist transformation of the economy.

The connection to the IWA-RFC is the organizational expression of the political principle of internationalism. The IWA-RFC connects workers across sectors and borders—steel, auto, logistics, health care, education—who face the same transnational corporations, nationalist union bureaucracies, and political establishments committed to war and austerity.

A National Steel Car contract fight in solidarity with steelworkers at ATI in Pennsylvania, with auto workers in Oshawa and Detroit, with Vale miners in Sudbury and Caledonia, is a categorically different thing from a local contract dispute carried out in isolation and managed by the USW bureaucracy. It begins to approximate the real power workers possess: the power to stop production, coordinated across global supply chains that capital itself has created.

Concretely, this means the National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee will be using the coming period before the August 8 expiration date to systematically deepen political consciousness among our coworkers, circulating analysis of the USW's history and the trade war, making the clear connection between the war in Iran and price rises, reaching out directly to workers at other plants and in other countries, and preparing for a fight that is under the democratic control of the rank and file at every step.

The USW is neither "international" nor a union in any meaningful sense of the word. It is a business whose stock portfolio grows as its members' jobs disappear, whose officials earn management-level salaries off our backs while delivering starvation-level strike pay, and whose nationalism—whether it takes the form of "Remember Pearl Harbour," "Buy American," or "Team Canada"—has always chained workers to their own ruling class and divided them from their brothers and sisters across the world.

The National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee was built in opposition to that. The task is now to take this fight to the next stage—connecting the immediate fight over the August contract to the broader political struggle—against austerity, war and the state suppression of the right to strike—and for a socialist program through the IWA-RFC. As our May 2026 statement declared: "Production today is an international process, and the counter-offensive of rank-and-file workers must reflect that reality."

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