National Steel Car workers in Hamilton, Ontario launch strike for second time in three years

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If you are a striking National Steel Car worker, we would like to hear from you about conditions in the plant, management's derisory contract offer and how you think the struggle needs to be taken forward. Use the form at the end of this article to provide your comments.

More than 1,200 workers at National Steel Car in Hamilton, Ontario went on strike at 12:01am Wednesday, August 12. The walkout followed a decisive vote to reject the company's "last, best, and final offer," which was handed out to workers over the heads of the United Steelworkers Local 7135 Friday afternoon.

The workers voted down the three-year contract proposal by a resounding 79 percent majority. Opposition was driven by the company's refusal to end the brutal piecework system, which it euphemistically terms the "incentive program." Three workers died at the plant between late 2020 and June 2022 due to safety issues directly bound up with the pressure of speed-up to meet arbitrary targets set by management. Just days before the previous contract expired last Saturday, the USW announced that it was giving up any struggle to end piecework and would instead push for union representation in the process of setting piecework rates.

NSC owner Greg Aziz essentially withholds a portion of workers' wages with the "incentive" system. He cracks it like a whip to make them work faster, generating higher profits for himself but greater misery, injury and death for the rank and file. This barbaric practice dates back to the sweatshops of Victorian England, immortalized and condemned in the novels of Charles Dickens.

This makes the USW's proposal to collaborate with Aziz in administering the "incentive" system all the more damning. For years, Local 7135's leadership, led by President Frank Crowder, has insisted that worker opposition to this barbaric murder machine must be subordinated to the collective bargaining framework. They based their "opposition" to piecework on an appeal to an arbitrator, who ruled just weeks prior to the contract expiration that they had no jurisdiction to overturn it. The union also proposed a reduction in wages for welders to $32 an hour as part of its plan to end piecework, thus dividing workers and blocking any genuine fight to put an end to this exploitative practice.

At a membership meeting on Sunday, August 9, Crowder and the Local 7135 leadership tepidly called for rejecting the company's offer, stating as the meeting drew to a close that if workers wanted a recommendation, they should vote it down. No perspective for developing the fight against piecework as part of a broader struggle by workers against escalating worker exploitation, the attack on the right to strike and undermining of working conditions across the board was proposed.

Alongside the retention of piecework, the company's so-called "best" offer provided for meagre pay raises of 3 percent in the first year, followed by 2 percent in years two and three. The Bank of Canada's projections expect overall inflation to hit 2.3 percent this year, but inflation on food and other groceries, as well as transportation and fuel, is invariably higher than the official estimate. National Steel Car's pathetic offer therefore amounts to a real-terms pay cut and comes after years of wage stagnation.

National Steel Car workers are striking for the second time in three years, following a bitter 41-day walkout in the summer of 2023 that was sold out by the USW bureaucracy. The USW organized publicity stunts with officials of other pro-business unions and representatives of the New Democratic Party, who came in for a photo-op and promptly left. These same individuals and organizations have sold out workers or carried out brutal austerity wherever they have held influence.

Workers must learn the lessons of the last strike and take control of this struggle away from the USW by building the National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee (NSC-RFC). Underscoring the necessity for a democratic organization of class struggle controlled by the rank and file, the last strike only proceeded after workers stood up at a union meeting and demanded the rejection of the employer's contract offer. Then, the USW leadership worked systematically to isolate the workers on the picket line, blocking any appeal for a joint struggle with other sections of workers facing the same attacks on their rights and conditions.

The NSC-RFC was founded in 2023 by rank-and-file workers on the shop floor who determined that the workforce could only advance their interests by carrying out the strike independently of the pro-company USW and broadening it to other sections of the working class.

There is a real basis for conducting such a fight. The ruling-class onslaught on workers' democratic and social rights is escalating dramatically as the powers that be seek to make the working class pay for rearmament, imperialist war and the enrichment of the financial oligarchy. State suppression of worker rights is becoming ever more common, as shown by the federal Liberal government's repeated use of anti-democratic provisions in the Canada Labour Code to ban strikes over the past three years without so much as a parliamentary vote. Based on a cooked-up "reinterpretation" of the Code's Section 107, successive Liberal government Jobs and Labour Ministers have relied on the unelected Canada Industrial Relations Board to order striking dockers, airline workers, rail workers and others back on the job.

Workers at NSC do not enter a strike lightly. The immediate impact on family finances is significant. Nevertheless, the USW will withhold even a pitiful strike pay of $425 per week for two full weeks. Coming hot on the heels of a three-week shutdown in July, this is callous and designed to force the rank and file to quickly accept whatever NSC offers.

Notwithstanding these challenges, workers have powerful allies to win their fight if they take control of the strike from the bureaucracy and make it the catalyst for the mass industrial and political mobilization of the working class against wage-cutting, the undermining of workplace safety, attacks on democratic and social rights and imperialist war and militarism.

The USW bureaucracy is hostile to this course, because its privileges are derived from the anti-worker collective bargaining framework that suppresses the class struggle and gives the bosses everything they want. The union's top brass sits on assets in excess of $2 billion, all acquired with the dues of the rank and file. Rather than using a small portion of this to finance decent strike pay and campaigns to broaden the fight, the bureaucracy views such assets as its slush fund for its high salaries and other perks.

The USW, like the entire union bureaucracy, is totally integrated into the corporatist framework of union/business/government "partnership" that conspires against the workers to swell the profits of big business. In its early days, it purged socialists from its ranks to sabotage revolutionary struggles and keep workers shackled to the capitalist state in Canada and the US. Its right-wing trajectory accelerated rapidly over the past 40 years, including through an even more direct embrace of virulent Canadian and American nationalism.

Workers at Stelco, ArcelorMittal and across Hamilton's industrial heartland are natural allies for National Steel Car strikers, because they face similar levels of ruthless exploitation, wage restraint and union apparatuses determined to work with corporate executives to strangle the class struggle.

These shared conditions create the foundation for broad political unity. This extends to public-sector workers across the city, from McMaster University and the hospital system to the municipal government workforce.

The assault on wages and working conditions at NSC is not an isolated event. It is part of a systemic, international offensive against the working class. Across Canada and globally, workers face speed-up, real-wage cuts and the elimination of safety standards. The sustained assault on the workers by ruling elites in all of the major capitalist countries is aimed at making them pay for war and corporate profiteering.

By gutting public services and suppressing wages, the federal government extracts wealth to finance tens of billions of dollars in additional military spending every single year in order to meet NATO's target of spending 5 percent on war and related infrastructure by 2035. The billions stripped from workers' wages and public healthcare are also used to facilitate Israel's genocide in Gaza and expand NATO's proxy war against Russia in Ukraine.

By establishing democratically controlled rank-and-file committees, workers will gain the independent organizational and political machinery needed to develop their own demands and organize collective action against management, its union "partners" and the entire ruling-class agenda of austerity and war that underpins the vicious disregard for workers' lives of companies like NSC.

As the NSC-RFC put it in its latest statement posted Friday,

> We say that the attacks on workers across the continent provide the basis for broadening our struggle into an industrial and political counteroffensive, linking up with workers in auto, steel, logistics and beyond through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. This fact is underscored by the growing rebellion among industrial and other workers across the US, finding its most conscious expression in the candidacy of socialist autoworker Will Lehman for the presidency of the UAW.
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> The USW will never lead that fight. While it calls itself an "international" union, it does nothing to mobilize its own members in the US and Canada, let alone the working class, in joint struggle. Its nationalism—from "Buy America" and "Buy Canadian," to "Team Canada" tariffs—chains us to our own ruling class and divides us from our brothers and sisters in the US, Mexico and around the world. Its corporatism subordinates our needs to the "competitiveness" of the bosses who exploit us.
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> This Rank-and-File Committee fights for a different program. Urgent preparations for a strike as the starting point of a genuine struggle for our demands once we repudiate the rotten contract offer brought back by the USW must be made. We should fight for:
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> 1. End piecework immediately. Wages start at the current incentive rate for all departments with no reduction in take-home pay. Worker control over safety and production—our lives come before Aziz's profits.
> 2. A 25 percent wage increase over the life of the contract to offset decades of real wage cuts, and the inflation driven by war and corporate price gouging.
> 3. Strike pay at $750 a week, immediately. The USW sits on over $2 billion in assets and an $850 million strike fund. It's our money.
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> The only way forward is to take the struggle into our own hands and broaden it to other sections of workers under similar attack—to build the National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee as an organization of independent working class power and class struggle.