

National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee leader on the fight against piecework, union betrayal, and the path forward

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26 August 2026

More than 1,200 workers at National Steel Car in Hamilton, Ontario, walked off the job on August 12 after voting by an overwhelming 79 percent to reject the company's "last, best, and final offer." The strike, the second at the plant in three years, is centered on the abolition of the brutal piecework system—euphemistically called the "incentive program"—that was the root cause of the deaths of three workers between 2020 and 2022: Fraser Cowan, Collin Grayley, and Quoc Le.

The National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee (NSC-RFC) was founded by shop floor workers in June 2023, on the eve of the last strike, after it became clear to them that the United Steelworkers (USW) bureaucracy would not wage a genuine fight for workers' demands. During that 41-day walkout, the USW starved workers on \$260 a week in strike pay while sitting on an \$850 million strike fund, paraded New Democratic Party (NDP) politicians through the picket line for photo ops, and ultimately pushed through a contract that left piecework intact and delivered inadequate wage increases.

The committee issued a statement Wednesday, titled, "Turn the National Steel Car strike into a counter-offensive by workers across North America: For class struggle, not trade war." The rank-and-file organization has become a pole of opposition to the pro-corporate USW leadership. It is affiliated with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), the organizing center of working-class struggle across borders founded by the International Committee of the Fourth International in 2021.

In a wide-ranging interview with the WSWs, a leading member of the NSC-RFC discussed the political lessons of the 2023 sellout, the murderous character of the piecework system, the USW's proposal to collaborate with the company in administering it, and why workers must take the struggle into their own hands and broaden it internationally.

Reflecting on the last strike, the worker explained that the USW did nothing to expand the struggle to other sections of workers, even though the issues over which the workers were fighting—wages, workplace safety, and the abolition of piecework—would have found powerful support among workers in Hamilton, across Canada, and internationally. "They paraded various union bureaucrats and NDP politicians in front of us for about a week—something they're also doing in the current strike. They had a little ice cream truck thing today. Then they sat, and

nothing really happened for six-and-a-half weeks until Steel Car decided to call them," he said. Within hours, a deal was hammered out.

The central issue then, as now, was piecework. "It pits one worker against the other. It's antiquated. It is definitely a form of wage theft. And it was the root cause of the three deaths here in the last few years. [CEO Greg] Aziz has the blood of at least five people on his hands in the time that he has owned the place."

Goin into the current contract negotiations, the USW leadership's position on abolishing piecework was "correct" in words, he noted, but "the execution was, frankly, terrible." The union unveiled a "half measure" at a sparsely attended May meeting: a flat \$32 an hour base rate, which would have meant a wage cut for many welders. "Instead, the answer we should have got was: your incentive rate is your actual wage, and this criminal that owns the place steals from you, or attempts to steal from you, 25 percent of your wages, no matter what job you're on, no matter what the rate is, unless you hop and skip and jump and dance to his tune, put your life on the line, wreck your body and potentially kill yourself."

The union's arbitration challenge predictably failed, since the collective agreement the USW itself negotiated explicitly states in a letter of understanding that piecework rates are not greivable or arbitrable.

In response, the USW bureaucracy has entirely abandoned the call for piecework to be abolished. Instead, it says it is ready to help administer it, just so long as the company agrees to allow union bureaucrats to have a say in setting the rates. "Now you have the USW involved in the process of how this company makes profit." This, the worker said, "would inevitably have the union executive being co-opted by the company to basically do the dirty work of management to make their numbers."

The worker pointed to the record of NSC owner Greg Aziz, who was indicted for fraud in the United States for ripping off approximately \$625 million from the Retirement Systems of Alabama, a state employees pension fund, for a rail car manufacturing plant, which was never finished. "He ended up paying \$20 million, essentially to go free. That's like you and me stealing \$10,000 from a bank and paying back \$100 and calling it even."

For the workplace deaths of Fraser Cowan, Collin Grayley, and

Quoc Le, Aziz paid a combined \$650,000 in fines. “If his profit margins are 10 percent, and they’re probably more, that’s \$250,000 profit a week off of one line. \$650,000 is probably one day’s worth of revenue for him for snuffing out three lives. It’s walk-around money.”

The worker contrasted Aziz’s treatment of his horses—housed in climate-controlled barns for his daughter’s show-jumping competitions—with the conditions inside the plant. “We’re in a building that was, a couple years ago, condemnable, almost ready to fall over. He treats horses better than the people who make the money he takes as profit.”

The worker addressed the USW’s promotion of nationalist “Team Canada” tariff policies, which chain workers to their own ruling class and pit workers against each other. “Rail cars are just like automobiles. We have parts that come from all over the world, and the cars get built here in Hamilton. It’s not a ‘Canadian car.’ It’s a conglomeration of parts from other areas that is just assembled here.”

He recalled that during Trump’s first administration, the late USW President Leo Gerard “basically tried to make the case that Canadian steel was important and should be exempt from tariffs because it’s good for the US war industry and the US military. If there’s ever a war, it’s going to be us that end up dying. It’s not going to be Greg Aziz or anybody else.”

To oppose the race to the bottom and war what is needed is international working-class solidarity. “If somebody’s building a rail car component in Mexico, they’re not our enemy. Or in the southern United States, or we get parts from China or Eastern Europe. They’re not our enemy as workers.”

The USW bureaucracy, the worker explained, systematically silences dissent. “Their silencing tactics were, at least when they got a hold of people, to bully them around, run them off and shame them.” In the lead-up to negotiations, the union told members “not to talk to anybody outside of whatever the negotiating committee said was okay. It’s kind of, sort of a very authoritarian thing. They don’t allow anybody to think for themselves.”

The reason is clear: “If they were to be forced to deal with an option that was more militant, and demanding more independence, it would threaten the United Steelworkers, certainly the USW 7135 executive, but also the district and the national office. It would be a sign that there was a way out, and that their methods may not be the only ones that can work.”

At the root of this is the collective bargaining framework itself, which the worker traced back to the Rand Formula of the 1940s. “In the front of every labour agreement since the 1940s... there’s a no-strike-and-no-lockout clause, and in it, it says, through the duration of the contract, the company agrees to not lock anybody out, and the union agrees to not do anything to threaten profits—and it’s a long list of things—slowdowns, sit-in strikes, all the stuff that used to work. They gave all that up for the agreement that the dues would come in.”

The result, he said, is that the union functions as “an industrial police force, basically to enforce that.” The arbitration over piecework proved the point: the union relied on a system “that hasn’t helped anybody and certainly doesn’t do anything to change the relationship with the employers.”

On the NDP politicians who flock to the picket line for photo ops, the worker was blunt. “There’s a reason why the NDP has lost so much support over the last 15 years. Because for all their rhetoric, their reformist rhetoric, they don’t actually do anything for workers. They’re a party essentially now of sort of suburbanite wine moms.”

Social democracy, he said, is “the least reactionary form of bourgeois politics, but it’s still reactionary, and its purpose... was to trap people.” He recalled Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s famous remark that his greatest achievement was saving capitalism from itself. “The NDP are not going to do anything for workers because they’re here to save the system.”

The USW, which helped found the NDP, maintains a “symbiotic relationship” with the party. “Again, to trap people in the system, not actually give them a way out.”

Conditions at the plant have “got demonstrably worse” since the 2023 sellout, the worker said. Wages have been stolen through piecework, the union has done nothing, and the current contract offer—3 percent, 2 percent, and 2 percent over three years—is even worse than what workers rejected three years ago.

What is needed, he argued, is a rank-and-file organization “that intends to take the fight to people, that intends to broaden the struggle, not keep it isolated within what’s going on at National Steel Car.” This means linking up with railroad workers in Canada and the United States, with the rank-and-file committees emerging in auto and logistics, and with workers internationally. “The only way these companies are going to learn is actually if we return to the level of militancy that built these unions, something which the bureaucracy has no intention of doing at all.”

“The issues at National Steel Car are not isolated,” he concluded. “This is the same stuff that’s happening in other places. And there are other rank-and-file committees showing up, basically out of people’s dissatisfaction with the way organized labour, as it’s constituted right now, operates.”

He pointed to the Nexteer workers in Michigan, the campaign of Will Lehman for UAW president, and the railroad workers’ struggle three years ago. “There’s a reason why this is gaining traction. It’s because the bargaining process within the ‘legal’ framework doesn’t work for workers.”

“These companies are international companies. National Steel Car might be based in Hamilton, but the cars we build go all over North America. You have to take this out of a national point of view and deal with things on an international scale.”

To get involved with the National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee, contact nscrfc@gmail.com or fill out the form below.



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