

“The union has given us the runaround for years”: National Steel Car workers discuss rank-and-file alternative as USW bureaucrats try to silence opposition

Our reporters
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Are you an NSC striker? Contact the National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee by filling out the form at the end of this article to share your experiences and thoughts on how your struggle can be led to victory.

More than 1,200 members of United Steelworkers (USW) Local 7135 have been on strike since August 12 at National Steel Car in Hamilton, Ontario after voting down the company’s proposed contract by a resounding 78 percent. Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* visited the picket line outside the railroad car production plant on Wednesday for a discussion with workers on the major issues in their struggle.

The strikers are now entering their third week with no pay. The USW withholds even its meagre \$425-a-week strike pay for the first two weeks, a calculated attempt to soften up the rank and file for another sellout. This is the same modus operandi the union bureaucracy used during the six-week strike in 2023.

Workers enthusiastically took WSWS articles, including statements from the National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee (NSC-RFC). With the intimidating presence of USW bureaucrats, including officials from other locals, some workers were hesitant to speak at length, though many nodded their heads in agreement as reporters explained the NSC-RFC’s call for rank-and-file workers to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the apparatus. The committee has called for a broadening of the battle for improved wages and conditions to other sections of workers across North America in opposition to the Canadian and American ruling elites’ use of the trade war to attack workers on both sides of the border. It has also exposed the USW’s abandonment of the central issue for rank-and-file workers in the current strike: the ending of the piecework system.

Just minutes into the reporting team’s intervention, a USW bureaucrat approached and announced that our reporters were “riling up” the workers. He said he had come to “defuse” the situation, although discussions with workers had been entirely

calm and respectful.

Within moments, a larger contingent of five to eight thuggish bureaucrats, led by Local 7135 Recording Secretary Shawn McMullin, surrounded the reporting team, swearing and shouting: “F*** off,” “Nobody wants you here,” “You’re just gonna twist their words.”

The shouting and expletives from the bureaucrats grew even louder when one WSWS reporter addressed the rank and file directly, asking them to demand that the USW executive explain its strategy for winning the strike. As in the last strike in 2023, the USW has advanced nothing but a strategy for defeat.

The USW apparatus is hostile to any discussion of the major issues in the strike because this would inevitably lead to the conclusion that workers must push aside the bureaucracy, assert democratic control over the struggle and advance a diametrically different strategy if they are to prevail.

The bureaucracy’s hostility notwithstanding, several workers spoke with WSWS reporters. After years of betrayals by the USW bureaucracy, some workers were initially skeptical about rank-and-file workers taking power out of the entrenched bureaucracy. “I hear what you’re saying, but it’s hard to get anything moving in there,” John said, adding, “I’ve tried for years.” Nevertheless he asked reporters what the NSC-RFC’s strategy was to win the strike.

The first step, they explained, was to expand the rank-and-file committee throughout the plant, recruiting ordinary workers from every department and shift. The committee needed to elect its own negotiating body, answerable only to the rank and file. All proposals would be disclosed to the shop floor, and no contract would go to a vote until every worker had ample time to study it.

Most importantly, the committee would fight to transform the NSC strike into the starting point of a broader fight by workers across Hamilton and the province. This would include sending flying pickets to ArcelorMittal Dofasco, Cleveland-Cliffs

Stelco and other major workplaces, to encourage the formation of their own rank-and-file committees and prepare joint industrial action.

The USW's strategy, in contrast, is to keep the rank and file trapped within a collective bargaining framework rigged in favour of the employers. At the same time, union officials claimed that corporate controlled politicians from the New Democratic Party will defend them. This is under conditions in which the federal and provincial governments regularly outlaw strikes whenever they become too costly for the corporations or threaten to escape the unions' control.

"Alright, I think I understand," John replied. "Still, even if I agree, that kind of thing you're asking for is really difficult to build," he said. Yes, such a fight was challenging, the reporters responded, but there was a growing rebellion of the workers in Canada, the US and other countries against the bureaucracy, and this made it possible for rank-and-file workers to assert their control and coordinate struggles across borders.

A group of workers sitting across the street from the main assembly agreed with the need for an internationalist strategy and acknowledged that globalization had gutted the unions' national-reformist approach. They spoke directly about the relationship between the piecework system and the deaths of workers like Quoc Le, who was killed on-site in June 2022.

Another group, locomotive workers sitting apart from the main assembly, said they had their own conflicts with the union apparatus. One of them, Sam, spoke to the poor conditions of the railroad tracks leading in and out of the facility.

"It's an 'accident' waiting to happen," he said. "Of course, the company doesn't care, but the union has also given us the runaround for years."

Sam pointed to steps that he and his coworkers had taken to warn Canadian Pacific locomotive engineers of the hazardous conditions, including painting warnings on rails that were damaged or destroyed.

"The reason we're sitting over here is we don't trust them," the worker said, indicating the USW bureaucrats' tent. "It's always 'Okay, don't worry, we'll get on it,' and then we never hear about it again."

"We're family here. I'm fourth generation at Steelcar. So are they," he said, indicating his two colleagues sitting under the shade.

"But it's all going into the toilet. And don't even get me started on why there's always so much speed-up on the line. We know there's a war going on. There's so much money to send for weapons to Ukraine, but we're getting shafted here."

Asked if he thought Canadian workers had any vested interest in supporting a trade war against the US, or Russia, or China, Sam replied, "Hell no. There's a version of me somewhere in Beijing or Moscow or wherever."

Broader working-class support for the strikers was evident. At a nearby mall, retired nurse Cindy expressed her strong solidarity for the strikers, speaking of the need for workers to

oversee safety conditions in their own workplaces.

She herself had been victimized by management after being accused of incorrectly measuring medication. This was a frame-up, she said, against which the Ontario Nurses' Association provided virtually no defence.

A grandmother taking her granddaughter out for lunch told us her husband had worked at NSC but left citing safety issues.

The opposition of many of the NSC workers to trade war and economic nationalism stands in stark contrast to the USW's bureaucracy's "Team Canada" and support for retaliatory tariffs in response to Trump's trade war measures.

Ontario NDP leader Marit Stiles visited the picket line to call on Premier Doug Ford to "buy Ontario steel." This is the same program advanced by Mark Carney, pitting workers on each side of the border against one another while the bosses use the trade war to demand concessions.

The NSC-RFC, in a statement issued Tuesday, advanced the opposite perspective: "To defend our jobs and living standards, we have to unite workers across Canada, the US and Mexico. Our enemy is not our class brothers and sisters across the border but the corporate executives, politicians and union bureaucrats who are demanding that workers pay for their trade wars and militarism."

The statement appealed to railroad workers in the US to set aside every NSCX car, which owner Greg Aziz uses to generate revenue during the strike. It called on the 23,000 USW members at US Steel and Cleveland-Cliffs in the US, who face a September 1 contract expiration, to form rank-and-file committees and prepare common action.

The NSC-RFC's program advances its own demands for striking workers: a 25 percent wage increase, abolition of piecework without a pay cut, worker control over safety, doubled strike pay, and the broadening of the struggle across Hamilton and beyond.

These demands speak to the objective needs of every worker on the picket line. The task now is to build the committee, department by department and shift by shift, and to transform this strike from an isolated walkout the bureaucracy is working to smother into the starting point of a counter-offensive by workers across North America.



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