“Borders don’t mean anything to the workers”: National Steel Car strikers in Hamilton, Ontario speak out

Our reporters
31 August 2026

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More than 1,200 workers at the National Steel Car plant in Hamilton, Ontario, members of United Steelworkers Local 7135, have been on strike since August 12 at North America’s largest railroad freight car manufacturing facility. Workers voted down the company’s final contract ultimatum by 78 percent and are determined to get rid of the company’s oppressive piecework system, which endangers their lives and robs their wages. This is their second strike in three years.

World Socialist Web Site reporters from Canada visited the picket line Saturday to speak to striking workers. Supporters of Will Lehman, the Mack Trucks workers and socialist candidate for president of the United Auto Workers, also traveled from Detroit. They distributed a statement from Lehman calling on workers in the Canada and the US to back the striking workers and oppose the trade war measures being used by the governments and trade union bureaucracies in both countries to divide the workers along national lines.

Lehman’s statement highlighted the call of the National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee for railroad and other workers in the US to ban the use of any railroad cars National Steel Car had leased to the railroad companies to keep revenue flowing during the strike.

The delegation spoke with workers on Saturday afternoon, when USW bureaucrats who regularly police the picket line were taking the day off. Last week, a gang of seven or eight USW bureaucrats, led by Local 7135 Recording Secretary Shawn McMullin, surrounded a WSWS reporting team, swore at them and attempted but failed to drive them off the picket line. Free from this bureaucratic intimidation, workers engaged in the most far-ranging discussion of tactics, political perspectives and the role of the union bureaucracy.

Workers expressed strong views that the piecework system, which the USW bureaucracy claims to oppose, but which it simultaneously has proposed to co-manage together with the company, is patently unfair and is a direct cause of the notoriously unsafe working conditions in the plant which have led to three worker deaths in three years.

The piecework system is designed to reduce workers’ wages, and so increase the profits of the company owner Greg Aziz. The difference between making and not making the piecework quota is much greater than the paltry 7% wage offer on the table. “They have the ability to remove 25% of my wage at will…So basically you give me a 6 or 7, 10% raise, then you can take away 25%. Is that a raise? No.”

Another worker with an incredible 51 years at the plant recalled that “My first contract was in September 1975. I started at $4.423 an hour day rate. And we got a $0.90 an hour raise then. That’s what? About 23%, I guess? But now, what does he offer us? 7%. That’s a slap in the face. It should be 7% each year.”

There was a broad consensus on the picket line that the piecework system which enriches Aziz constitutes a price exacted in workers’ blood. Fraser Cowan, Collin Grayley and Quoc Le were killed on the job between 2020 and 2022.

One of the workers who spoke to the WSWS was a witness to one of the workplace fatalities. “I experienced the death here. It was a horrible tragedy. Because of the rush of trying to make piece work, things weren’t done properly or, you know, rushed a bit. The bars that were supposed to support broke right off and the crane wasn’t holding the bulkhead, so down it went and crushed the guy. It was pretty awful. I’ll never forget that night.”

Another worker remarked bitterly at the system of the class justice which permits workers to be killed on the job, and owners to treat the deaths of workers as the “cost of doing business.” Aziz paid a total of $650,000 in fines. One worker remarked bitterly, “So what’s the price to kill a worker?... You weigh this as a business person, you weigh this price, whatever the price is set at. Mr. Aziz, any employer in this country should be held accountable... Nobody should go to work and be killed... And the money is, you know, you can't pay enough. You really can't pay enough."

Another worker declared that "To us, that's a brother or a sister that's gone… someone who said see you later to their family, not goodbye. And they didn't get to go home to their kids, right? So yeah, that's something we got to get rid of. Nobody should be dying for a paycheque."

Another worker declared that the health and safety situation was so bad that the Ontario Ministry of Labour, which has cut back workplace safety inspections and is short staffed, was forced to operate what amounts to a "branch office" at the plant.

The witness to the death of his coworker recalled that "We were told to come back to work the next day until, I think it was the labour board, said, no, there has to be a proper investigation. I think it was only two days, though, and they wanted us back in … to the company, it doesn't really mean much to them."

The workers understand the basic reality that their labour under grossly unsafe conditions is the only source of Aziz's profits. "We're the workers, we're the ones making his profit. And that's how he treats us," said one.

The fact that Lehman supporters had come from the United States to express their solidarity, and appeal for joint action across the Canada-US border elicited a powerful and defiant response.

"We should all unite together. I mean, our governments want to pit us against each other. I have nothing against Americans. I know Trump is a problem with our government. But for me, our own government is our problem…at the end of the day, we need to come together," said the veteran worker with more than a half century of work at the plant.

The Lehman supporter replied that "the American workers have a problem with Trump too." The Canadian worker responded, "So we all agree."

The demand by the National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee that Canadian and US rail workers refuse to handle NSCX railcars Aziz has leased to undermine the impact of the strike was strongly supported on the picket line.

"I think that's a great idea. Why should he keep making money while we suffer, right? I hope that the American workers see what we're going through and they realize that they're just as much part of it as we are and we need to come together and we're brothers. You know, borders don't mean anything to the workers, right?"

The support for the international unity of the working class stands in stark contrast to the position of UAW President Shawn Fain who backs Trump's tariffs and trade war measures. In response, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney has issued his own counter-tariffs, which are backed by the trade union bureaucracy in Canada. In both countries, the trade war will be used to accelerate the attack on jobs and demand ever greater wage and benefit concessions from workers.

"What do you think about the idea of uniting workers across the borders in a common fight?" one reporter asked a striking workers. He responded, "That's a great idea. I think that's probably what has to be done in order to take the power back to the people. And the workers, right?"

When asked about the call by the National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee for striking workers to take the struggle out of the hands of the USW apparatus, one worker with long experience at the plant said the bureaucracy would do everything it could to prevent workers from asserting their control. "They treat the union as a business. It's their business, and they will do what they have to do to protect that business. Like any other insurance company, they collect money, and they don't want to pay out."

This is underscored by the decision of the USW to withhold the meagre strike pay of $425 per week for the first two weeks of the strike, in order to soften workers up for an imposed concession contract. The USW has $2.5 billion (USD) in assets, according to its latest financial filing with the US Labor Department. It paid out $86.2 million in salaries and expenses to its hundreds of officers and staffers, more than 13 times what it paid out in strike benefits (US$6.5 million) in 2025. This includes $282,812 ($393,141 CAD) to USW President David McCall and $252,660 ($350,986.43 CAD) to Orville Warren, the national director in Canada.

"What would you say to the proposition that the workers should be the boss?" the reporter asked. He responded, "Oh, absolutely. Who better to run a company than the workers? Who else knows how to run this place?"