Contract deadline looms this week for 23,000 steelworkers in the US

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Steelworkers: what are your main issues for the next contract? Tell us by filling out the form below; all submissions will remain confidential.

Contracts covering 23,000 workers at US Steel and Cleveland-Cliffs expire Tuesday amid a major escalation of the Trump administration's trade war against Canada.

Steel is one of the principal battlegrounds in the dispute. Washington already levies a 50 percent tariff on Canadian steel, and Ottawa will answer on September 8 by doubling tariffs on specified US steel and aluminum products to 50 percent. Canada sends nearly half its steel output to the United States, while Canada provides one of the largest export markets for US mills, tying production and employment on both sides directly to the escalation.

The contract deadline also falls in the middle of a strike by more than 1,000 National Steel Car workers in Hamilton, Ontario. Together, these struggles point to the potential for a cross-border movement against corporations and governments that intend to make workers pay for the trade war through job cuts and attacks on wages, benefits and working conditions.

Workers can realize that potential only through a rebellion against the United Steelworkers bureaucracy, by forming rank-and-file committees at mills in both the United States and Canada. Although the USW covers workers in both countries, its officials line up behind the national capitalists on each side of the border, promoting tariffs and "American" steel in the United States while backing retaliatory tariffs and Buy Canadian policies in Canada.

Companies demanding sharp concessions on healthcare

Both companies are demanding major concessions. US Steel has proposed a five-year agreement with wage increases of 4 percent in the first year, 3 percent in each of the next three years and 4 percent in the fifth. The proposal contains no cost-of-living adjustment, leaving workers exposed to inflation through 2031. A $4,000 signing bonus would not offset these inadequate pay increases.

US Steel also wants healthcare "plan design changes" and potentially higher employee cost-sharing. The company proposes that a joint union-management committee identify savings whenever projected annual healthcare costs rise by more than 3 percent, before management considers charging workers more. This would leave workers voting on a contract without knowing how much they could ultimately pay for medical care.

Cleveland-Cliffs has yet to make a wage proposal. Instead, the company is demanding monthly healthcare premiums, thousands of dollars in additional deductibles and reduced coverage. It wants to force non-Medicare retirees into a high-deductible plan, eliminate existing incentive programs and replace them with profit sharing. Cleveland-Cliffs also wants workers to use up to one week of vacation when they take Family and Medical Leave. Separately, it wants FMLA leave to run concurrently with workers' compensation and sickness-and-accident benefits.

Workers also confront deadly conditions in the mills. An August 2025 explosion at US Steel's Clairton Coke Works killed Steven Menefee and Timothy Quinn and injured 11 others. An electrical accident involving a malfunctioning transformer at Granite City Works killed 62-year-old electrician Mitcheal Nelson on July 11. On August 13, a pot-hauler accident at Cleveland-Cliffs' Burns Harbor mill killed 28-year-old Jonathan Stepp.

Despite the scale of the attack, the USW has held no strike-authorization vote at either company and has not told workers to prepare for a strike. It has issued bargaining updates and text messages containing general statements while withholding the full proposals and counterproposals. At Cleveland-Cliffs, officials have instructed workers to display "Fair Contract Now" signs in their cars but have organized no action to mobilize the membership.

Everything points toward the USW either announcing a last-minute extension, instructing workers to remain on the job under an expired agreement, or presenting a tentative agreement worked out behind closed doors as a fait accompli.

The USW followed precisely this course in refinery bargaining earlier this year. After agreements covering 30,000 refinery and petrochemical workers expired January 31, the USW kept them on the job under rolling extensions. The USW and lead company Marathon then established a four-year national pattern providing only 15 percent in wage increases, discarding the 25 percent demand and protections against AI job cuts approved through the National Oil Bargaining Program. The pattern, aimed at providing labor peace through 2030, was announced just weeks before the US-Israeli war against Iran sent oil prices and industry profits soaring.

Once the pattern removed the threat of a national stoppage, the USW isolated workers at Whiting, Indiana and Martinez in northern California, where management demanded still deeper cuts. Lockouts at both facilities are still ongoing, but the USW kept the rest of the industry at work, undermining the national unity of refinery workers and allowing the companies to carry out cuts facility by facility.

The poison of nationalism

The USW has ranked among the most persistent proponents of tariffs and Buy American policies. For decades it has promoted nationalism and chauvinism to divert its members' anger while its own officials helped the steel corporations destroy hundreds of thousands of jobs and strip retirees of pensions and healthcare. The bureaucracy accepted concessions on wages, staffing and work rules in the name of making "American" steel competitive, but the companies continued to close plants and eliminate jobs.

Trump invoked Section 232 of the Trade Expansion Act in 2018 to impose a 25 percent tariff on most steel imports. The USW backed the measure and pressed Biden to retain it. After Trump returned to office, the union welcomed his broader tariff campaign.

The USW has opposed Trump's blanket tariffs on Canada and demanded a Canadian exemption from Section 232. But it does so from the standpoint that Canadian industry should function as part of a US-led North American economic and military bloc. The bureaucracy supports Section 232 and Section 301 tariffs in general and Buy America procurement rules. It has demanded that Washington reserve federally funded steel purchases for products melted and poured in the United States, while conditioning Canada's access to the American market on Ottawa aligning its trade-enforcement policies with Washington.

Its alternative to Trump's direct tariff offensive against Canada is in reality a protectionist continental bloc, dominated by the United States and directed above all against China.

The officials of USW in Canada, where the union has 225,000 members, has taken the opposite national position. As Trump escalated the US-Canada trade war, Canadian National Director Marty Warren backed Ottawa's pledge to retaliate "dollar for dollar" and demanded stronger Buy Canadian policies and restrictions on imported steel.

The corporations operate internationally while the USW divides its workers along national lines. Cleveland-Cliffs owns major operations in both countries, including Stelco in Canada, and can shift production and investment across the border according to its profit interests.

The same nationalist program shaped the USW's 18-month campaign against Nippon Steel's $14.9 billion purchase of US Steel. From the announcement of the deal in December 2023, the union appealed to Washington to block it on national-security and trade grounds. It praised Biden when he prohibited the acquisition in January 2025 and then urged Trump to maintain the ban. Trump reversed Biden's decision in June 2025 and approved the takeover under a national-security agreement. The agreement granted the federal government a "Golden Share," allowing Trump or his designee to veto certain production, sourcing, pricing and trade decisions.

Workers in the United States and Canada can defend their jobs and living standards only by rejecting both national programs and organizing a common struggle across the border.

The National Steel Car strike in Ontario, the second in three years requires the support of American workers. More than 1,200 workers walked out on August 12 after rejecting the company's "last, best and final offer." At the center of the strike is abolishing the piecework "incentive program," which drove the speedup that contributed to the deaths of Fraser Cowan, Collin Grayley and Quoc Le between 2020 and 2022.

Workers formed the National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee during the 2023 strike after the USW isolated their 41-day walkout and pushed through a contract that left piecework intact. In an August 25 statement, the committee appealed directly to workers at US Steel, Cleveland-Cliffs, Stelco and Dofasco to form rank-and-file committees, exchange delegations, hold joint meetings and prepare common industrial action. It also called on railroaders throughout Canada and the United States to stop handling National Steel Car's leasing fleet.

US Steel and Cleveland-Cliffs workers should prepare a united, cross-border struggle by forming committees at every mill and facility. These committees should demand an immediate strike-authorization vote, publication of every company and union proposal, and no work under an expired agreement without a membership vote. They should fight for wage increases with cost-of-living protection, no increase in healthcare costs, no layoffs or plant closures, and rank-and-file control over safety, including the unconditional right to halt dangerous production.

The committees must establish direct communication with National Steel Car workers and with workers at steel facilities throughout the United States and Canada. By linking through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, workers can coordinate action across companies, industries and national borders without waiting for permission from union officials.

Workers must answer trade war with their own international strategy, uniting their industrial power in a common fight for jobs, wages and safe working conditions.