Why is the USW so afraid of the rank and file at National Steel Car?

National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee
18 September 2026

If you are a National Steel Car striker, we would like to hear from you about the strike, conditions at the plant and the strategy advanced by the Rank-and-File Committee to broaden the struggle. Fill out the form at the end of this statement.

Brothers and Sisters,

On Sunday, September 13, reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* visited the picket line at our Hamilton, Ontario plant to speak with some of us. Within minutes, United Steelworkers Local 7135 President Frank Crowder arrived, summoned by his associates, and launched into a violent outburst, repeatedly calling the reporters "trash" and physically blocking them from talking to strikers.

His aggressive behaviour is just the latest example of the USW bureaucracy's hostility towards rank-and-file workers speaking out about the six-week-old strike. Crowder already blocked WSWS reporters from discussing the strike with rank-and-file workers on another occasion last month. He and his colleagues in the USW apparatus have taken to referring to the National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee, an organization built by workers at our plant independently of the USW bureaucracy, as organized by "rats."

The thuggish behaviour by Crowder and his associates exemplifies the bitter hostility of the entire USW bureaucracy towards rank-and-file strikers at National Steel Car. They know that our overwhelming strike vote and anger over the dangerous working conditions in the plant demonstrate that we are ready to wage a genuine struggle against the exploitative piecework system, and for decent-paying, safe jobs for all. But their primary concerns are protecting their relations with NSC owner Greg Aziz and upholding the union's alliance in "Team Canada" with the federal Liberal and provincial Tory governments.

They are therefore determined to suppress all independent rank-and-file action in our strike for fear that we could break out of the straitjacket in which the union leadership has confined our struggle, and that we could start mobilizing broader layers of the working class against corporate profiteering, unsafe working conditions, austerity and war.

Crowder and his gang know very well that the WSWS has supported our committee by publishing its statements and has given workers a voice like no other media outlet. When reporters had the chance to speak with strikers last month, our colleagues addressed the life-threatening conditions produced by piecework, miserably low pension rates, falling real wages, their opposition to the US-Canada trade war and support for a unified struggle with workers in the US.

The WSWS has a more than decade-long record of reporting on workers' struggles at National Steel Car. It exposed the horrific conditions behind the death of Quoc Le in June 2022, the third worker to die at our plant in just 18 months. When we established the NSC-RFC during our last strike in 2023, the WSWS provided a platform for the rank and file's demands and a perspective to guide our struggle. Our statements warning about the pro-employer collective bargaining system and the danger of expecting the capitalist courts to do anything about the deaths of our colleagues were vindicated by the sellout of our last strike after 41 days and the wrist-slap fine of $240,000 received by NSC for Le's death.

Abolish the high-exploitative and murderous "incentive" pay system!

Workers on the line should take Crowder's hysterical outbursts against the NSC-RFC and the WSWS as a sign that the USW Local 7135 leadership is preparing to unveil another sellout agreement. We know that Aziz has important orders whose deadlines are coming up. We have been on strike for six weeks with no substantive communication from the executive, let alone the elaboration of a strategy to challenge the company and the political establishment that stands behind it.

We know that a key element of the upcoming sellout tentative contract will be the retention of the "incentive" system, i.e., piecework. Ending this highly exploitative and frankly murderous system is a precondition for establishing a safe workplace. Yet it was only weeks before the contract deadline and under pressure from the rank and file, that the USW bureaucracy announced it was launching a "fight" against piecework.

In reality, this was a "fight" that was set up to fail. Showing more concern for the multi-millionaire Aziz's bottom-line than the members who are living pay cheque to pay cheque, the union proposed a new a base rate of $32 per hour that for many workers would mean a real-terms pay cut. Then, after an arbitrator issued an undemocratic and flagrantly anti-worker ruling that the USW has no right to bargain over the existence of piecework (because it signed it away in a side letter years ago), Crowder and Co. abandoned the fight to abolish piecework altogether.

Now the USW bureaucrats are saying they want to be in on setting the piecework rate, that is, on determining the rate at which we should be incentivized to accept speed-up and dangerous working conditions.

Moreover, as always, we are left in the dark. The USW apparatus has told us nothing about how the union's integration in the administration of piecework would work or what the rates would be.

More and more of us understand that the incentive system is a

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mechanism that compels us to implement the company's own productivity drive, forcing us to wreck our bodies and risk our lives for a "bonus" that should be part of our regular pay.

The USW's capitulation on this issue makes it all the more imperative that the rank and file take the leadership and conduct of our strike out of the hands of the union apparatus.

Throughout, our committee has insisted that the abolition of piecework and the punishing production rates it incentivizes must be coupled with an increase in the base rate of all production workers to the current "incentive rate"; AND that the wage increases provided in a new contract must be on top of this base rate.

A genuine working-class leadership would mobilize the whole membership, encourage every worker to take an active role in the struggle, and arm us with the information and organization needed to win the strike. The USW does none of this, because an informed, active and organized rank and file is the one thing its privileged officials fear above all else.

Instead, Crowder and his associates spend their time slandering the NSC-RFC and the WSWS. Crowder asserted that the WSWS is on the line looking for handouts, that the NSC-RFC "divides" the union, that the WSWS twists the words of workers, and that the committee is collaborating with National Steel Car management.

We are not looking for handouts. It is the USW bureaucrats who collect our dues while angling for higher office, and the top union bosses rake in six-figure salaries.

USW Canada head Marty Warren takes home roughly $350,000 a year. Frank Crowder and Recording Secretary Shawn McMullin no doubt want a padded nest when they hightail it out of NSC after years of betraying us. Both are running for trusteeship in the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board, as a springboard for more lucrative posts. If anyone lives off the workers, it is the bureaucrats, not us.

The union sits on more than $2 billion in assets built up from our dues money, but starves us on $420 a week in strike pay. In 2023, it starved us out for 41 days on $260 per week in strike pay before pushing through a sellout.

Nobody has divided the rank and file from our allies throughout the working class better than the USW bureaucracy. It has isolated our strike and refused to link it to the struggles of other workers, including the 225,000 other USW members in this country and 850,000 across North America.

The WSWS does not twist the words of workers. It publishes what workers actually say and gives the most militant and class-conscious workers a voice by printing our committee's statements. It is the bureaucracy that does not communicate with its members, bars them from talking to anyone, and won't answer elementary questions as to what we are fighting for and what is the strategy to win the strike.

Broaden the struggle! Our fight is a fight of and *for* all workers!

The issues in our strike extend far beyond Local 7135. The USW's nationalism chains us to our own capitalist ruling class and divides us from our brothers and sisters in the United States, Mexico and around the world. Its alliance with corporate management prioritizes the profits of the bosses over our needs and those of our families.

This is not a failure of individual bureaucrats like Crowder, McMullin, or even a higher-up like Marty Warren. It is the logic of the entire trade union apparatus that has been integrated through corporatist ties with the state and big business, and serves as an industrial police force by suppressing our struggles on behalf of the ruling class.

The answer is not to retreat before these threats. It is to build the NSC-RFC as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees in order to join our fight with the rapidly escalating struggles of the working class across Canada and the US, and internationally. The bureaucracy's resort to smears and intimidation are a measure of its weakness and isolation from the rank and file. It attacks us and our supporters precisely because it cannot win the argument in open debate.

There is a strong basis to win support for our fight throughout the working class so we can go on the offensive. Some 275,000 education workers across Ontario have been working without a new contract for almost three weeks as the right-wing Ford government seeks to escalate the onslaught on public education, which millions of people in this province depend on. Anger is widespread among workers in the United States towards Trump's trade war with Canada and "America First" agenda, while millions of workers on this side of the border are being thrust onto a collision course with Carney's government as it sells off the country's infrastructure and raw materials to oligarchs and investment funds, and cuts public spending to pay for war. We must appeal directly to these sentiments by making our strike the spearhead of a broader counteroffensive that mobilizes the industrial and political power of the working class to achieve decent-paying, secure jobs, well-funded public services and an end to imperialist war and the enrichment of the financial oligarchy.

The NSC-RFC declares:

- Build the NSC-RFC throughout the plant, department by department and shift by shift.
- Elect our own negotiating committee, answerable only to the rank and file.
- Demand rank-and-file control of the strike, of safety and of production.
- Abolish the incentive system, with base pay equal to the maximum wage including the incentive rate. Full worker control over production line speeds and safety.
- Broaden the struggle: send delegations to Dofasco and Stelco, to the railroads and the factories and the warehouses, and link our fight to the growing rebellion of workers across the continent through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

Contact the NSC-RFC at nscrfc@gmail.com or by filling out the form below.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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