Cleveland-Cliffs: Worker dies at Pennsylvania coke plant, Ontario plant being idled, while USW keeps steelworkers on the job without new contracts

Samuel Davidson
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After 30-day contract extensions expire at US Steel and Cleveland-Cliffs, tens of thousands of steelworkers and miners remain without new agreements. The USW has arranged rolling 48-hour extensions after the initial extension ended October 1, keeping workers on the job while giving management the power to terminate the agreements with 48 hours' notice. Cleveland-Cliffs' separately-bargained mining operations are likewise being kept on extensions.

The United Steelworkers is keeping its members on the job even as it admits workers "are being pushed to the max" with forced overtime and speedup, and while the company demands sweeping concessions.

On Sunday, 53-year-old Jeffrey Smith was killed at Cleveland-Cliffs' Monessen Coke Plant in Pennsylvania after being pinned between two large door machines. The union has issued no public statement naming Smith or addressing his death, nor has it informed members of his death in the bargaining text updates reviewed by the WSWS.

The next day, Cleveland-Cliffs announced that it will indefinitely idle finishing operations at its Stelco plant in Hamilton, Ontario, threatening up to 500 jobs. The announcement is a warning of the massive restructuring and job destruction confronting steelworkers as the North American steel industry is reorganized.

At the same time, more than 800 USW members at BP's Whiting, Indiana refinery remain locked out since March 19 and about 120 workers at Marathon's Martinez, California refinery have been locked out since June 22.

In Canada, more than 1,200 National Steel Car workers in Hamilton, Ontario have been on strike since August 12 after nearly 80 percent voted down the company's contract offer. Workers are fighting for higher wages and against a piecework incentive system tied to speedup and unsafe working conditions.

In each case, the USW bureaucracy is isolating the workers rather than mobilizing its hundreds of thousands of members in a common struggle.

Steelworkers at US Steel and Cleveland-Cliffs must follow the example of workers at National Steel Car, who have organized a rank-and-file committee to take the struggle out of the hands of the union bureaucracy. Rank-and-file committees should be formed at every US Steel and Cleveland-Cliffs mill and mine to demand the publication of all bargaining proposals, organize strike authorization votes and prepare joint action across companies, facilities and national borders, up to and including a strike.

At US Steel, the company's latest five-year proposal would provide only about a 19 percent pay increase, barely enough to keep pace with inflation, while health care deductibles would more than double and workers would pay more in coinsurance, doctor visits, emergency-room care and prescription drug copays. The company is also seeking to cut into workers' vacation time by requiring it to be used for some intermittent FMLA and state leave.

At Cleveland-Cliffs, management wants major health care concessions. It initially demanded that workers be forced into a high-deductible plan. While it since retreated from that proposal, it still is seeking monthly employee premiums, higher deductibles and reduced coverage. Cliffs has also sought to eliminate existing incentive-pay programs in favor of profit sharing.

Roughly 2,400 miners at Cleveland-Cliffs' taconite operations in Minnesota and Michigan are also being kept on the job. The USW maintains a separate mining bargaining table covering Tilden, United Taconite, Hibbing Taconite and Northshore Mining, further dividing workers employed by the same corporation.

Five workers killed in little more than a year

Jeffrey Smith is the fifth worker killed in little more than a year in accidents connected with major US Steel and Cleveland-Cliffs operations.

On August 11, 2025, Steven Menefee and Timothy Quinn were killed in an explosion at US Steel's Clairton Coke Works near Pittsburgh. OSHA subsequently cited US Steel for seven serious violations involving process safety management, hazardous-energy controls and worker training. US Steel has contested the citations.

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On July 11 of this year, 62-year-old electrician Mitcheal Nelson was electrocuted at US Steel's Granite City Works in Illinois while attempting to shut down a malfunctioning transformer.

Barely a month later, on August 13, 28-year-old Jonathan Stepp, a father of six, was killed while operating a pot hauler at Cleveland-Cliffs' Burns Harbor Works in Indiana.

These deaths have occurred amid years of labor-management safety committees, joint initiatives and negotiated safety language. Workers continue to be killed while management—with the agreement of the USW bureaucracy—retains control over staffing, maintenance, production schedules, outsourcing, training and investment.

The deaths of Jeffrey Smith, Steven Menefee, Timothy Quinn, Mitcheal Nelson and Jonathan Stepp make clear that steelworkers themselves must have the power to stop unsafe work and exercise rank-and-file control over safety conditions.

Stelco layoffs expose the nationalist program

Cleveland-Cliffs will indefinitely idle cold-rolled and coated finishing operations at its Hamilton Works in Ontario beginning October 9, laying off about 350 production workers and potentially affecting as many as 500. The company says affected workers will be offered positions at its Lake Erie Works in Nanticoke.

The layoffs come less than two years after Cleveland-Cliffs bought Stelco for CAD $3.4 billion with the support of the USW bureaucracy. The takeover was promoted as strengthening unionized steel production in North America and was approved by the Canadian government with employment and investment commitments.

USW Local 1005 has accused Cleveland-Cliffs of violating those commitments, but as of September 30 the USW International had issued no public statement on the layoffs and no call to mobilize Cleveland-Cliffs workers in the United States and Canada against the job cuts.

Instead, the USW bureaucracy's trade policy has centered on closer US-Canadian cooperation against China and other foreign competitors. The USW has repeatedly called on Washington and Ottawa to coordinate trade policy, protect North American steel production and use tariffs and other trade measures against its main competitors in China. While the USW has opposed the Trump administration's tariffs on Canada, it has supported the Trump administration's use of tariffs against China.

In March, USW International President Roxanne Brown welcomed administration investigations into global overcapacity, declaring that the United States must "push back against China and other bad actors."

The same policy is being carried out in other industries represented by the USW. In the tire industry, thousands of jobs have been eliminated or threatened at Goodyear, Michelin, Bridgestone, Sumitomo and other producers. Rather than organize a common struggle against plant closures and layoffs, the USW has centered its response on appeals to Washington for tariffs and trade restrictions on imported tires.

For decades, the United Steelworkers bureaucracy has promoted nationalism and chauvinism while mills and plants across the country have been closed and hundreds of thousands of workers thrown out of work. The corporations organize production internationally, shifting investment and jobs across borders in pursuit of profit, while the USW tells workers that their interests are bound up with the success of "their" national industry. This pits workers in the United States, Canada, China and other countries against one another, diverts opposition away from the corporations carrying out the layoffs and closures and lines workers up behind tariffs, trade war and the broader economic and military interests of the capitalist state.

Build rank-and-file committees at every mill and mine

Steelworkers cannot allow the present struggle to remain under the control of the USW bureaucracy.

Rank-and-file committees should be established at every US Steel and Cleveland-Cliffs facility, including the iron ore mines, independent of the union apparatus and company management. These committees must take control of the contract struggle and prepare workers for a common fight against both corporations.

Strike authorization votes should be held immediately, and preparations made for joint strike action by US Steel, Cleveland-Cliffs and mining workers. The rolling contract extensions should not be used to keep workers indefinitely on the job while the bureaucracy negotiates concessions behind closed doors.

Workers should demand substantial wage increases above inflation, no increase in health care costs, no erosion of pensions or incentive pay, enforceable guarantees against layoffs and plant closures, full staffing and maintenance, and rank-and-file control over workplace safety.

Above all, workers must reject the nationalism and chauvinism used to divide them by company, industry and nationality. Steelworkers in the United States and Canada confront the same corporations and have common interests with workers internationally.

The enormous industrial power of steelworkers, miners, oil workers, rubber workers, aluminum workers and other sections of the working class can be mobilized only by breaking from the labor-management partnership and building a network of rank-and-file committees based on what workers need, not what the corporations claim they can afford.

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