

National Steel Car: Why did the USW allow far-right Tory leader Pierre Poilievre to visit our picket line?

National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee
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Over 1,200 workers at National Steel Car's railcar manufacturing plant in Hamilton, Ontario, have been on strike for more than two months to end the brutal piecework system and secure real wage increases. Contact the National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee at nscrfc@gmail.com or by filling out the form at the end of this article to help break the isolation of the strike imposed by the United Steelworkers bureaucracy.

Brothers and Sisters,

On Friday, October 9, the leader of the Conservative Party of Canada and the official opposition in Ottawa, the far-right demagogue Pierre Poilievre, showed up on our picket line. This was a major political event that revealed much about the class character of the United Steelworkers (USW) bureaucracy and its hostility to our demands.

For starters, such a visit would had to have been greenlighted by the USW District 6 and National leadership. Without assurances from the union, there's no way a federal politician of Poilievre's notoriety would appear on a picket line where he could expect a hostile reception from workers aware of his notorious record. Poilievre heads the most right-wing party within the political establishment. One that in recent years has, like its Republican Party ally in the US, increasingly morphed into a far-right political formation. Poilievre is an advocate of corporate deregulation, tax cutting, the gutting of public services and worker rights, and militarism and war. Poilievre rose to national prominence as a fervent promoter of the fascist-led "Freedom" Convoy, whose instigators called for the establishment of a dictatorial regime to abolish the few remaining public health measures still in place in early 2022 to combat the COVID-19 pandemic.

However Poilievre's visit came to pass, it fits seamlessly into the corporatist, Canadian nationalist politics of the USW bureaucracy. The union's national director, Marty Warren, and other leading officials are among the most vociferous proponents of "Team Canada" in the ongoing trade war between Washington and Ottawa. This propaganda claims that bosses and workers in Canada have the same interests in the economic conflict with Trump, and that workers must make "sacrifices," including by accepting higher prices for basic necessities and real wage cuts. The bureaucrats in the USW, Unifor and other unions are more than willing to line up behind even the most reactionary bourgeois politicians on the basis of flag-waving nationalism and the defence

of Canadian capitalism's profits. The fact that this happens on both sides of the border is shown by UAW President Shawn Fain's enthusiastic applause for Trump's "America First" tariffs.

The picket line visit by Poilievre was part of his "outrage" tour over Stelco's decision to lay off 500 workers in Hamilton and Nanticoke. Cleveland-Cliffs, Stelco's US owner, has cited the tariffs and counter-tariffs adopted by Trump and Carney to justify throwing workers out of a job. The entire political establishment has denounced the layoffs, not because they're worried about workers' jobs, but because Stelco is one of Canada's most important primary steel producers and the ruling class doesn't want to lose the ability to make their own weaponry and military equipment to wage war. They also conveniently ignore the fact that workers in the US face the same demands for concessions from Cleveland-Cliffs. Some 23,000 US steelworkers have been kept on the job by the USW since the end of August without a new contract.

Poilievre responded to Stelco's decision by announcing a new leader of his "steel caucus," Micheal Guglielmin, a former VP of Operations of Imperial Metal Services. Mr. Guglielmin's "prescription" for the problems facing the steel industry, particularly workers, range from the usual right-wing tax cuts and deregulation garbage, to dealing with "unfair trade practices" and "Chinese steel dumping," and "securing reliable access to steel for Canadian businesses."

It is a measure of how far to the right the USW apparatus has moved that Poilievre's pro-corporate, pro-war ravings sound like the USW's own talking points. Poilievre more or less parroted recent statements by top USW officials, including a joint statement on the trade war they issued with Unifor last April. Warren and Unifor's Lana Payne declared at the time their support for an "industrial strategy" to "safeguard our industrial economy," including "strategic sectors" like "aerospace and defence." They urged former central banker and current Liberal Prime Minister Mark Carney to "flex market muscle" against the US and to diversify "export markets while enforcing trade rules against unfair practices—particularly from China." Making clear their support for the trade war measures against the US and preparations for military conflict with China, they added, "Standing up to one source of economic coercion while ignoring another will not protect our industrial economy."

We declared in an NSC-RFC statement in response: “National Steel Car workers and workers throughout all manufacturing sectors have no interest in being dragooned into Canadian imperialism’s trade wars and military conflicts.

“The USW and Unifor’s denunciation of Chinese workers is especially disgusting in this regard, because China is the target of war preparations on the part of the US and Canadian governments. Our allies in the fight for good-paying, secure jobs, affordable food and energy prices and a contract that guarantees safe working conditions are the workers labouring under the same conditions as us across the United States and Mexico, as well as the super-exploited Chinese workers, who serve as a benchmark to which the corporate elites here want to reduce us to.”

In this context, workers should consider the comment by Shaun McMullin, our Recording Secretary, who responded to rank-and-file criticism over Poilievre’s picket-line visit by saying, “Anybody who can amplify our message is welcome on the strike line.” This is the same McMullin who a few weeks ago told strikers to get another job, calling it “an act of solidarity,” while opposing our committee’s call for an urgent campaign to rally working-class support for our struggle. And it is the self-same McMullin who, together with USW Local 7135 President Frank Crowder, has repeatedly intimidated strikers and physically barred them from talking to reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site*, which has given workers a voice to speak out during the strike and supported the building of the NSC Rank-and-File Committee.

The “message” being put out by McMullin and his pals in the bureaucracy is not ours. We have no interest in backing a trade war against our colleagues in the US, nor joining in the military build-up and economic bullying against China. As one of our fellow strikers put it during an interview with the WSWs earlier in our strike, “There’s a version of me somewhere in Beijing or Moscow or wherever.”

The USW has smeared the National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee for, among other things, collaborating with National Steel Car, being a “scam,” and breaking down “solidarity.” All the while, the USW Local 7135 leadership wants to collaborate with NSC on setting the “incentive” rates, after hiding behind an arbitrator’s decision to abandon the rank-and-file’s demand that piecework be abolished. And as Poilievre’s visit demonstrated, they and the USW top brass are happy to collaborate with most reactionary, pro-business political forces.

The support from the union bureaucracies and so-called “left” parties for such right-wing, anti-worker policies allows Poilievre and the Tories to get a hearing among workers by fraudulently posturing as friends of the little guy. For the past 40 years, the unions and their allies in the New Democratic Party have ensured that the working class has been politically suppressed. They claim that “progressive” politics consists of championing the war in Ukraine, tariffs against the US, and “sacrifices” for “Team Canada,” i.e., to pad the bottom lines of Canada’s corporations, banks, and financial oligarchs at our expense.

To win our strike, we urgently need a radically different strategy. We shouldn’t be looking for allies in the political establishment, corporate boardrooms, or the USW head office, but among workers in Hamilton and across Canada, in the US, and

internationally, all of whom confront the same attacks on their jobs and living conditions that we do. The National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee calls for:

- The unification of our strike with the struggle of workers at Stelco against layoffs, and the 23,000 workers at US Steel and Cleveland-Cliffs south of the border who the USW have been forcing to work on contract extensions for nearly two months.

- The rallying of support from railway workers across North America to refuse to handle all NSCX-marked rail cars, that is the cars NSC owner Greg Aziz leases so he can continue making profits during our strike.

- The expansion of the movement to the 9,000 Stellantis workers in Windsor, Brampton, and Etobicoke, who voted last weekend overwhelmingly for strike action against plans to sell off the Brampton Assembly Plant and lay off workers on the third shift in Windsor.

- An appeal to the more than 250,000 education workers across Ontario working without contracts, thousands of whom will join rallies this weekend, to link their fight for real-wage increases, job security, more staff in schools and billions to upgrade dilapidated schools with our struggle for decent wages and a safe workplace.

- The development of our strike as the spearhead for a continent-wide working-class industrial and political counter offensive against war and trade war, austerity and the gutting of worker rights, and for decent-paying, safe and secure jobs for all.

It’s time to build the National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee to break our strike out of the isolation imposed by the USW apparatus. It should be constructed as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees in a decisive repudiation of the nationalism and pro-corporate toadying of the USW bureaucracy, which boasts of heading an “international” union while doing everything to divide workers in Canada and the US.

We need committee members from every shift and department to form delegations to go to visit workers at Stelco, Stellantis and other worksites to fight for a broad-based worker-led industrial and political mobilization in Canada and throughout North America against the ruling elite’s onslaught on our jobs and living conditions. Contact us at nscrfc@gmail.com or fill out the form below to join the fight.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact