Reject the US Steel contract! Build rank-and-file committees to organize a common fight by steelworkers!

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Are you a US Steel or Cleveland Cliffs worker? Fill out the form at the end of this article for information on building a rank-and-file committee to oppose the USW sellout contract.

The United Steelworkers bureaucracy announced a tentative agreement with US Steel last week for a four-year contract covering 11,200 workers at 13 facilities across six states. Workers should reject the deal and organize rank-and-file committees at every mill, coke plant and mine to take the contract struggle out of the hands of the union bureaucracy.

Steelworkers should unite with their brothers and sisters at Cleveland-Cliffs, who face a virtually identical contract, and fight for collective strike action with National Steel Car workers in Canada and locked-out BP refinery workers in Whiting, Indiana, and Marathon workers in Martinez, California.

Workers have every reason to be angry. For decades, the steel corporations, with the collaboration of the USW apparatus, have imposed wage concessions, job destruction, forced overtime and speedup. Five workers have died at US Steel and Cleveland-Cliffs facilities in little more than a year, while the corporations rake in hundreds of millions of dollars and their executives accumulate vast personal fortunes.

The agreement comes nearly three months after the previous contract expired on September 1. Throughout this period, the USW kept workers on the job, refusing to mobilize approximately 21,000 steelmaking workers at the two corporations and an additional 3,000 iron ore miners at Cleveland-Cliffs. Separate agreements covering the miners have now been ratified, dividing steelworkers from the miners who supply their mills.

As at Cleveland-Cliffs, the USW is preparing to push through the agreement by mailing workers glossy contract summaries along with their ballots rather than distributing the complete agreement. Workers must go to their local union offices to see the actual text. After months of secret negotiations, the bureaucracy wants workers to entrust their livelihoods, health and safety for the next four years to the very officials who have overseen the destruction of their jobs and living standards.

Wages, healthcare and retirement

The agreement provides wage increases of 5, 4, 4 and 5 percent over four years, exactly the same as at Cleveland-Cliffs, along with a $4,000 one-time payment to secure ratification. With annual inflation around 4 percent, the increases would largely be consumed by rising prices.

The lowest hourly wage will rise from $28.53 to $29.96. In 1979, the minimum rate under the basic steel wage system was $8.26, equivalent to roughly $38 today. Despite the massive increase in productivity, the current minimum is roughly 25 percent below what workers received nearly half a century ago in inflation-adjusted terms. A worker who started at US Steel in 2005 has seen the purchasing power of their base wage rise just 4 percent in 21 years, and a worker with seven years of service has suffered a real wage cut. Stagnant wages force workers to put in punishing amounts of overtime to pay their bills.

Workers need substantial increases to make up for decades of losses, along with full cost-of-living adjustments.

The USW touts the preservation of premium-free healthcare as a major victory. But annual deductibles will rise to $300 for individuals and $600 for families, and emergency room copays to $125. Premium-free coverage does not prevent the company from shifting medical costs onto workers and their families. The union has not published a comprehensive comparison of existing and proposed provisions, including prescription drug costs, coinsurance and out-of-pocket maximums.

Steelworkers spend decades exposed to extreme heat, deafening noise, toxic chemicals and industrial dust. They need comprehensive healthcare throughout their working lives and retirement, not higher medical expenses. The union's announcement, meanwhile, says nothing about increasing pensions for retirees, whose purchasing power has been steadily eroded by inflation.

The most damning aspect of the agreement is its failure to address deadly working conditions. In little more than a year, these workers were killed at US Steel and Cleveland-Cliffs facilities:

• August 11, 2025: Steven Menefee, 52, and Timothy Quinn, 51, killed in an explosion at US Steel's Clairton Coke Works outside Pittsburgh. Five other workers were injured.

• July 11, 2026: Mitcheal Nelson, 62, electrocuted while working on a malfunctioning transformer at Granite City Works in Illinois.

• August 13, 2026: Jonathan Stepp, 28, a father of six, killed while operating a slag pot hauler at Cleveland-Cliffs' Burns Harbor Works in Indiana.

• September 27, 2026: Jeffrey Smith, 53, crushed between two coke oven door machines at Cleveland-Cliffs' Monessen Coke Plant in Pennsylvania.

The USW's bargaining updates have largely ignored these deaths. Its announcement of the agreement mentions recent fatalities only in passing, without naming a single worker. More than 15 months after the Clairton explosion, all seven US Chemical Safety Board recommendations remain open. As the *World Socialist Web Site* reported in August, management's refusal to halt production to carry out a safer procedure for purging coke oven gas lines exemplified the subordination of safety to production.

The safety improvements the USW touts, including better training for electricians and a process for identifying hazardous locations, are basic precautions that should already be in place. Nothing in the published

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highlights establishes minimum staffing requirements, limits compulsory overtime or gives workers independent authority to shut down unsafe operations without fear of victimization.

The five deaths are only a fraction of the human cost of steel production. Studies of Pittsburgh-area coke oven workers found extraordinarily high rates of lung cancer. Steelworkers cannot entrust their lives to joint union-management safety programs. They must establish independent rank-and-file safety committees with the authority to halt unsafe production, investigate deaths and injuries, and enforce safe conditions.

Enormous profits and executive fortunes

The USW touts an additional $4.5 billion in capital investment, but investment commitments are not job guarantees. The corporations have repeatedly used new machinery to eliminate jobs. US Steel has already approved a nearly $3 billion hot strip mill at its Edgar Thomson Works that will raise annual capacity from 2.2 million to 3.5 million tons, nearly 60 percent. The contract highlights say nothing about how many jobs will be created or eliminated.

Meanwhile, US Steel and its new owner, Nippon Steel, are reaping enormous rewards. US Steel reported adjusted EBITDA of $740 million in the third quarter, up more than 84 percent from a year earlier, and recorded nearly $8 billion in net profits between 2021 and 2024. CEO David Burritt received nearly $103 million in reported compensation between 2018 and 2024, and $108.8 million from cashing out his stock when Nippon completed its acquisition in June 2025. That is equivalent to the annual wages of more than 1,600 steelworkers earning $65,000. His base salary rose nearly 44 percent over the same period, while standard steelworker base wages rose about 28 percent, barely outpacing inflation. Burritt has enthusiastically welcomed the agreement, declaring, “Our best days are ahead of us.”

While still legally recognized as a union, the USW no longer functions as an organization for the defense of workers’ interests. It functions as a second layer of management, working with the corporations to cut jobs and wages and boost productivity. In 1980, US Steel employed approximately 100,000 steelworkers; by the end of 2024, its entire North American workforce had fallen to just over 14,000, and communities from Youngstown to Homestead were devastated. Labor required per ton of steel fell from 10.8 hours in 1983 to 2.1 hours across the American industry by 2020. Those advances could have shortened the working day, eliminated dangerous jobs and allowed earlier retirement. Instead, they were used to cut jobs and raise profits, while the USW subordinated workers’ interests to the competitiveness of American producers.

This record is the consequence of the USW’s political program: the defense of capitalism and the national interests of American imperialism. The bureaucracy has joined the steel corporations in lobbying both Democratic and Republican administrations for tariffs, promoting the lie that the enemies of American steelworkers are workers in China and Mexico rather than the corporations that exploit them. The USW opposes Trump’s tariffs against Canada, where it has members, but supports tariffs against China, and its 2025 convention endorsed a coordinated US-Canadian trade strategy with targeted tariffs.

Both the Biden and Trump administrations have justified their steel policies on national security grounds. Biden blocked Nippon Steel’s acquisition of US Steel, while Trump approved it under an agreement giving the government extensive powers over the company, and cited national defense when he raised steel tariffs to 50 percent. The USW’s economic nationalism is inseparable from American imperialism’s preparations for military confrontation with China.

Bernie Sanders and the Democratic Socialists of America offer no alternative. Sanders backs targeted tariffs on Chinese steel, and the DSA’s orientation to the Democratic Party ties workers to the same nationalist framework.

Steelworkers share the same fundamental interests as workers in China, Japan, Canada, Mexico and throughout the world. To advance their fight for wages, jobs and safety, they must establish their independence from the corporations, the union bureaucracy and both capitalist parties by building rank-and-file committees at every US Steel and Cleveland-Cliffs facility, democratically controlled and answerable to the membership.

These committees will fight for the immediate distribution of the complete agreements, adequate time for discussion and a democratic vote free of USW interference. They will fight for substantial wage increases, full cost-of-living protection, comprehensive healthcare for active and retired workers, pension increases, an end to forced overtime and the protection of every job. Safety committees will fight for unrestricted access to company safety and exposure records, independent investigations of deaths and injuries, and lifetime medical care and income protection for workers with occupational illnesses.

The committees will unite steelworkers and miners across both corporations, including the 2,100 machinists at Cleveland-Cliffs’ Middletown Works and 1,000 UAW members at its Dearborn Works, overcoming the divisions imposed by the bureaucracies. They will prepare coordinated action up to a common strike and mobilize support for National Steel Car workers and locked-out refinery workers. National Steel Car workers have formed their own rank-and-file committee and appealed for a joint struggle with Stelco and US steelworkers. Through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, steelworkers can establish direct contact with workers around the world.

The productive capacity built by generations of steelworkers must be used to meet the needs of the working class, not to enrich executives or provide the industrial foundation for another imperialist world war. We urge steelworkers at US Steel and Cleveland-Cliffs to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* to discuss organizing rank-and-file committees and taking up this fight.



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