

Canada: Vale-Inco strike now longest in Sudbury Basin history

By Carl Bronski
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Earlier this week the strike at the giant Vale Inco nickel mining complex in Sudbury, Ontario entered its tenth month, making it the longest industrial dispute in the over one hundred year history of mining operations in the Sudbury Basin. The strike by 3,100 United Steelworkers (USW) Local 6500 members in Sudbury and 120 refinery workers in Port Colborne has now surpassed the previous record of eight months and twenty-three days set during a bitter confrontation with Canadian-owned Inco in 1978-79. In 2006, Vale, a Brazilian based mining transnational, purchased the company.

Vale is insisting that if its operations are to be “sustainable in all pricing cycles,” it must impose a “unified approach to compensation” across the globe. This requires, contends the company, that “Canadian workers become more competitive with workers in less developed countries”—a demand that will result in speed-up and skyrocketing workplace injuries even as workers’ pensions, bonuses and wages are eroded.

To enforce its will, Vale has been gradually ramping up production in Sudbury using scores of contractors and so-called replacement workers, managers, and 56 skilled members from USW Local 2020 which organizes 240 office, technical and professional workers at the complex.

In October, Vale used managerial personnel and the non-striking Local 2020 workers to restart minimal mine and copper concentrate mill operations in Sudbury.

Then in January, smelter production was restarted. Alongside management and technical staff, Vale mobilized contractors and replacement workers, many of whom are permanently bivouacked inside the mining complex. The scabbing operation continues to be carried out in great secrecy, but hundreds of “replacement personnel” are now working at the Sudbury complex.

In response to this unprecedented provocation (scabs have never before been deployed in an Inco labour dispute), the USW International and Local 6500 officialdom have staged publicity stunts at various international corporate venues, issued nationalist harangues, and organized the occasional demonstration.

No attempt has been made to systematically mobilize the working class in the Sudbury area (one of the cradles of industrial unionism in Canada), let alone in Ontario and across North America, in support of the strike.

Rather the union bureaucracy has been preaching faith in the courts—which have issued injunctions facilitating Vale Inco’s strike-breaking campaign—and are urging workers to look for support from the big business federal and Ontario Liberal Party leaders, respectively Michael Ignatieff and Dalton McGuinty, and the social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP).

The utter refusal of the USW bureaucracy to mobilize the union’s membership and resources behind the strike was exemplified by the recent Local 2020 contract negotiations. These negotiations culminated in the ratification of a new contract that legally compels the office, technical and professional workers to support Vale-Inco’s scabbing operation.

Last fall, when Vale-Inco unveiled its plan to use the Local 2020

membership to do the work of the striking miners and smelting workers, the local leadership, with the clear support of the International union, instructed them to comply, on the grounds that if they didn’t they risked being found in breach of their collective agreement and subject to disciplinary action. Dan Serre, the Local 2020 unit chair, told the *Sudbury Star* that his advice to his members was not to “race” to do their assigned tasks, “Just do the work and do it safely.”

Now the union has again capitulated to Vale’s “divide and conquer” tactics.

Realizing the strategic importance of further demoralizing and demobilizing the strikers, Vale presented a contract offer to Local 2020 officials that contained terms somewhat better than the concession-filled contract it is seeking to impose on the production workers. The Vale offer included a \$5,000 signing bonus, a \$20,000 early retirement incentive, grandfather protection on a new, concessionary two-tier pension scheme, and a 6.5 percent wage increase over three years.

From the outset, the USW negotiators refused to make the forced scabbing of the Local 2020 membership a contract issue, thus making clear that they were ready to continue collaborating with Vale Inco’s strike-breaking operation.

Moreover, the way in which the USW presented Vale’s contract offer to the membership makes clear that the union officialdom wanted it to be ratified.

But the union bureaucrats, whether in Sudbury or anywhere else, did not get to where they are without mastering the art of the double-talk. Walking a fine line in a city where a social explosion amongst thousands of striking workers is openly contemplated by all sides, the Local 2020 leadership, undoubtedly acting in close consultation with the union brass in Toronto and Pittsburgh, worked for ratification while posing, on manufactured grounds, to oppose the Vale offer.

At the Local 2020 ratification meeting, the bargaining committee announced that the proposed agreement was a “good deal,” a “fair contract” and “very competitive.” If USW Area Coordinator Gerry Loranger is to be believed, mention was made of the 3,200 strikers—“We did not forget about (Local 6500). We spoke about them as a committee several times”—but in only such a way as to make clear that the union has no intention of mobilizing the working class to defeat Vale Inco’s strikebreaking campaign.

After highlighting the positive aspects of the agreement, the bargaining committee meekly recommended that the deal be turned down. But they did so not by evoking the need for solidarity with the ongoing strike, but because the proposed contract did not achieve all the objectives the union established at the outset of negotiations! This was rich indeed, coming from a union leadership that has bargained several concession contracts in a row, refused to fight layoffs, stood aside whilst its membership is scab-herded and, which, whilst recommending rejection, somehow failed to mention even the semblance of a strategy should a lock-out ensue!

International USW president, Leo Gerard, himself a lifetime member of

Local 6500, whilst acknowledging that Vale's offer was crafted to drive a wedge between the two groups of Vale-Inco workers, did not even appear at the ratification meeting.

The membership received the message loud and clear. The deal was as good as they could get. There would be no strike mobilization. No plan to defy the company's scab-herding. The rejection recommendation was only a pathetic attempt by the bureaucrats to save face. As Randy Hoop, a material coordinator at Creighton Mine and Local 2020 member told *Northern Life*, "Based on the nine month (strike by Local 6500) here in Sudbury, I don't think they (Local 2020) can get more." Eighty-four percent of the membership voted to accept the contract.

Predictably, reaction on the Local 6500 picket lines was bitter. Signs and postings calling out "Local 2020 scabs" have begun to appear. Local 6500 President Dan Fera all but admitted the impotence of the Steelworkers leadership and the impasse into which they have led their membership. The situation "is in the hands of the company," said Fera. "Clearly, they control it."

Meanwhile, Vale Inco has moved briskly to exploit the breach. "We are having ongoing discussions about continuing to full production," declared company spokesman Steve Ball. "... We have employed the services of contractors to help us ramp up production. We have indicated the number of (additional) people we would need would be in the hundreds. I'm not going to talk about any specific numbers or contractors. We are starting to look at other resources."

Vale-Inco strike at a crossroads

How is it that thousands of militant mine, mill and smelter workers with a long, proud history of struggle now face the prospect of watching their strikebound facilities ramp up to full production with a scab workforce, some of which has been recruited from its own ranks? How is it that they have been left alone to confront a huge transnational firm? It has not always been so. Indeed, the site of the present dispute has been for over a century a center of militant strikes and mass resistance to the ore bosses' demands for speedup and attacks on wages, benefits and mine and mill safety.

But even at the height of the union's membership and power in Northern Ontario, rank-and-file workers repeatedly came into conflict with the conservative leadership of its various unions and its policies of class collaboration. If gains were won through the Mine, Mill and Smelter and Steelworkers unions, it was because of the militant action of the workers themselves.

For decades, the USW has repudiated the militant traditions with which its membership has been associated and sought to integrate itself ever more closely with corporate management and the government. Over this period the union has betrayed one struggle after another. The result has been the hollowing out of the union, to the point where its active membership in the Sudbury basin has fallen from 25 percent of the local workforce in the 1970s to less than 5 percent today

Despite the militancy and solidarity of the northern Ontario mine and smelter workers, their movement has suffered from an ultimately fatal political flaw. It is the same weakness that has undermined the entire Canadian labor movement. From the outset, the hallmark of the trade union bureaucracies was servility to the profit system and opposition to any socialist political struggle by the working class in favour of a reactionary nationalism that seeks to divide workers internationally.

Since the beginning of the current dispute at Vale Inco, Canadian USW District 6 leader Wayne Fraser, alongside the Local 6500 leadership in Sudbury and USW International chief Leo Gerard have at every turn sought to play the nationalist card, lambasting the acquiescence of the federal government in allowing a foreign-owned firm to purchase a company that had for over a century been headquartered in Canada. The bureaucrats in the trade unions along with their allies in the NDP promote

the illusion that there are "good" home-grown capitalists, who, for the benefit of all Canadians, altruistically refuse to maximize their profits. This chimera is counter-posed to the "bad" foreign interlopers who will do their utmost to beggar the Canadian population.

Yet even a casual observer of the history of mining in Canada, let alone of the Inco operation, will have no trouble recalling the relentless drive by Canadian owners to maximize their profits at the expense of the mining communities and the bitter strikes that followed—including the Great Inco Strike of 1978-1979 that shortly after its conclusion saw the permanent layoff of more than 20,000 mine workers. Moreover, the most powerful Canadian-based corporations are also multinational, like Vale, scouring the globe for the best possible return on their own investments at the expense of workers internationally.

The USW's nationalist denunciations of Vale Inco are part of its ongoing promotion of economic nationalism. In the name of defending "Canadian" or "US jobs," the USW calls for protectionist policies aimed at placing the burden of unemployment on workers in other countries, while imposing wage and jobs cuts on their own members in order to boost the corporate "competitiveness" of "our" companies.

The Vale-Inco workers' militant anti-concessions strike is now at a crossroads. If the strike continues under the political and organizational leadership of the USW, it will be strangled and defeated.

Vale-Inco workers must strive to make their strike the spearhead of an industrial and political counter-offensive of the entire working class against the drive of big business and their governments to make working people pay for the world capitalist crisis through wage and job cuts and the dismantling of public and social services. Militant industrial action, including the organizing of mass picketing and solidarity strikes, must be coupled with the development of an independent political movement of the working class that fights for a workers' government committed to reorganizing economic life on socialist lines so production and employment can be based human need, not the profits of the few.

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