

Toronto strike at the crossroads: Answer government strikebreaking with an industrial-political offensive against the Tories!

By the WSWS editorial board
8 July 2002

The strike by 24,000 Toronto city workers is a pivotal struggle for workers throughout Ontario and across Canada. The right-wing administration of the country's largest city provoked the strike by demanding the elimination of contractual restrictions on the privatization of municipal services.

Outside workers, including trash collectors, parks and recreation employees, and ferry service workers, began the walkout on June 26 and were joined July 5 by 15,000 inside workers, including day care workers, public health nurses and clerical staff. The strikers, members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), have stood firm in the face of a concerted drive by the media to turn the general public against them. Trash collection and other critical public services have been sharply curtailed or completely shut down. But the strikebreaking efforts of the authorities and the press have fallen flat, with broad sections of the public siding with the workers.

Behind Mayor Mel Lastman stands the provincial Tory government. Since coming to power in 1995, the Tories have spearheaded corporate Canada's offensive against the working class, gutting public and social services and rewriting labor and employment standards legislation to facilitate strikebreaking and the imposition of 50- and 60-hour workweeks.

The Ontario Tories set the stage for the current conflict by downloading provincial responsibilities onto Ontario's municipalities without providing the local governments with adequate funding. Now, in the name of averting a public health crisis which they themselves have provoked, they are preparing to rush through legislation making the strike illegal. According to Public Security Minister Bob Runciman, who is serving as Ontario Premier while Ernie Eves vacations, "There is legislation ready to go so that it would be short notice to call the legislature back and deal with the situation."

Toronto workers should defy any strikebreaking legislation enacted by this discredited and hated provincial government. They should fight to broaden the struggle, calling on workers throughout the province, including the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) strikers at the Chatham Navistar plant, to mount a united industrial and political struggle to defend the jobs, wages and conditions of all working people. This is a political struggle against a government that has waged a non-stop offensive against all of the past social gains of the working class. Its aim, therefore, should be the removal of the Tories from power.

If the government is successful in forcing the Toronto strikers to return to work, the Tories intend to impose the full scope of their reactionary program. According to a recently leaked Ministry of Labour memo, Eves is considering naming Guy

Giorno as the mediator-arbitrator, who could ultimately impose a settlement. Giorno was chief of staff to former premier Mike Harris and a key architect of the Tory's reactionary "Common Sense Revolution."

Objectively, the Toronto city workers strike represents a challenge to the big business program that has been pursued by all levels of government—federal, provincial and municipal—for well over a decade. Concerned that it is losing ground in the international struggle for profits, investment and market share, Canadian big business has demanded and all the establishment parties—Liberal, Tory, New Democratic Party (NDP), Parti Québécois and Canadian Alliance—have implemented massive tax and budget cuts to increase corporate profits and the incomes of the rich while stripping working people of all protections from the blows of the capitalist market.

Aware that their right-wing agenda lacks popular support, the corporations and big business politicians are resorting to violence to impose their demands. Last month Don Milner, a member of Canadian Auto Workers Local 444, was run over and critically injured by a professional strikebreaker near the Navistar plant in Chatham. The truck manufacturer, emboldened by the Tories' 1995 law abolishing restrictions on the use of scabs, are demanding wage cuts of up to \$10 an hour and the imposition of a compulsory 56-hour workweek.

In addition to the strike-breaking legislation being prepared against the Toronto strikers, city officials have concluded a deal with private contractors to remove trash from three dumping sites.

If the Toronto workers' struggle is not to be isolated and defeated—suffering the same fate as a host of militant strikes over the past two decades—it must be transformed into an explicit working class political struggle. In opposition to big business's demands for privatization, deregulation and unfettered market rule, the working class must advance a program to reorganize economic life so as to make human need, not the profits of a few, the driving principle.

Already working people are paying a horrific price for the dismantling of social and public services. Toronto, which in the 1970s was hailed as "the city that worked," is now the homeless capital of North America. Big business and its most right-wing political representatives are seeking to exploit mounting popular anger over hospital emergency queues and months-long waiting lists for life-saving medical procedures to press for the privatization of health care management and ultimately the replacement of Medicare by a two-tier system. In Walkerton, Ontario, the Tory program of budget-cutting, privatization and deregulation directly led in May 2000—as even a government-appointed publicly inquiry found—to the poisoning of the town's water supply and the deaths of seven people.

Claims by big business and their political hirelings that the current levels of public and social services are unsustainable are lies. As a result of the technological revolution of the past quarter century, labor has become far more productive. What stands in the way of the deployment and use of this technology to eliminate poverty and want is not inadequate resources, but the social relations of capitalism. Society's productive forces, including labor, are deployed, under the profit system, for the sole purpose of enriching the tiny minority of capitalists.

Were the Toronto City workers to aggressively identify their struggle with the defence of the entire working class, fighting consciously to make it the spearhead of a cross-Canada mobilization against the dismantling of all public and social services, including Medicare and public education, they would meet with a massive outpouring of support. And not only from other trade unionists, like those battling Navistar. The Walkerton disaster, Enron and WorldCom, and more generally increasing economic insecurity and social inequality have shaken the middle class, including small businessmen, farmers and professionals who in the past might have voted for Mike Harris.

As a result of the Walkerton disaster and other scandals surrounding his administration, Harris was forced to resign last March, and was replaced by his former deputy premier and finance minister Ernie Eves.

Fearing an electoral rout in 2003, Eves has tried to adapt to the growing anti-business sentiment with the cancellation of the proposed Hydro One privatization and his one-year postponement of the latest round of corporate tax cuts and new tax subsidies for private schools. But even these gestures brought a sharp and immediate retort from Canada's financial center on Bay Street, which insisted that there be no letting up in the offensive against the working class.

What Eves' equivocations and Harris's sudden exit from the political stage in the wake of his Walkerton testimony demonstrate is a deep crisis in the ruling class. There is a growing chasm between all of the official parties, whose mass base of political support has sharply eroded, and the broad mass of the population.

Popular sentiment against big business and the capitalist market is rising. But this must be given conscious and organized political expression. Successful prosecution of the Toronto city workers' struggle as a political fight, in the first instance against the Tory provincial government, would be a powerful catalyst to the building of a new mass party of the working class based on a socialist and internationalist program. Only through such a party will the working class be able to carry forward the

struggle for the fundamental reorganization of socioeconomic life needed to ensure a decent living standard and basic rights for all.

Once workers recognize that the big business offensive cannot be seriously opposed, let alone defeated, simply through collective bargaining and reformist parliamentary politics—both of which take the present socioeconomic system as immutable—a second no less critical conclusion follows: the leaderships of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) and the trade unions as whole are the principal obstacle to such a struggle.

If big business has been able to drastically erode the social position of the working class and the Ontario Tories have been able to prevail for the past seven years, it is because the unions have systematically suppressed the class struggle. First they subordinated the working class to Bob Rae and his NDP government, even as Rae initiated the attack on social services and basic union rights.

When the NDP's right-wing policies enabled the Harris Tories to come to power, the union officials sabotaged the mass movement against the Tories, most notably with the short-circuiting of the 1997 teachers strike. Now the unions are preparing to support the coming to power of a Liberal provincial government, even as the Toronto Star expresses alarm that the Liberals are attacking the Eves Tories from the right.

Workers must beware: The CUPE and OFL leaders are preparing to use the imminent strikebreaking legislation as the pretext to shut down the Toronto workers' strike. Although it has been evident from day one that a confrontation with the provincial Tories was inevitable, CUPE has done nothing to prepare either its members or the public at large for defiance of a Tory strikebreaking law.

Workers must not accept yet another betrayal by the union leadership. The direct intervention of the Tories against the strike poses before working people in Ontario and across Canada the central political issues: should the profit needs of big business take precedence over public and social services and the jobs and rights of those who administer them?

Toronto city workers should defy any Tory strikebreaking law and appeal for mass support. Militant industrial actions—demonstrations and strikes—must be coupled with a political offensive directed in the first instance at the Eves Tory government, but with the aim of developing a new mass party of the working class to prosecute the struggle for a socialist program that defends workers' living standards and democratic rights.

© World Socialist Web Site <http://www.wsws.org>

To contact the World Socialist Web Site e-mail: editor@wsws.org