

Canada

Meatpackers strike against demand for \$6 per hour wage cuts

Lee Parsons
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Nine hundred fifty workers at Quality Meat Packers' two Toronto-area plants have begun their third week of strike action. Members of United Food and Commercial Workers Local 743, the strikers are seeking to moderate management's sweeping concessions demands, while Quality Meat is pressing for massive wage cuts in line with those ceded by the UFCW to other meatpackers.

Management's demands include a six-year contract, wage cuts of more than \$6 per hour (depending on job classification), elimination of long-term disability insurance, a reduction in overtime pay rates, and the right to use part-time labor.

The UFCW has repeatedly bowed before Quality Meat's concessions demands. Last year it agreed to a contract extension. Earlier it accepted the introduction of a two-tier wage system under which new hires receive \$4 an hour less than other workers doing the same job for the first three years of their employment.

Prior to the strike, the beef and pork producer threatened to close one or both plants. Since the strike began management personnel have continued to operate some production lines at the Quality Meat plant in the suburb of Bramalea. The UFCW has dismissed fears the company might hire strikebreakers, although other Canadian meatpackers have used that tactic to impose concessions and Ontario's Tory government has amended the province's labor laws to facilitate the use of scab labor.

'Management said, this is what we got--take it or leave it,' picket captain John Madieros, a 17-year Quality employee, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. 'When we came with our proposal they said, no, we don't want to see that.'

'These people here, they work hard. They sweat. They put the company in business. We said let's take a general cut, but management doesn't want to do that. It wants the laborers to go right down to the bottom. They're the ones that produce, that do most of the hard work. The company isn't touching the mechanics, the electricians, the carpenters. They're touching the laborers and the laborers are the ones doing all the pushing, all the lifting. And they get a \$6.36 cut--that's a lot of money, coming down from \$16.76 to \$10.40 per hour.'

The strike at Quality Meat began less than a month after the UFCW bureaucrats performed last rites on the struggle waged by 850 workers at the Maple Leaf Foods meatpacking plant in Edmonton, Alberta to resist massive wage cuts and defend their jobs. In November 1997, the Edmonton workers walked out on strike in defiance of Maple Leaf's threats to close the plant. Then, when management announced that the plant would indeed be closed, the UFCW leadership effectively abandoned the Edmonton workers, announcing a toothless consumer boycott and agreeing to job cuts and wage reductions of \$6 an hour at Maple Leaf plants in Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Ontario.

Last month, the UFCW national office lifted the consumer boycott after the jobless Edmonton workers agreed to a severance and pension package worth about \$4 million, or some 60 percent of what was called for in their lapsed contract.



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