

Tory premier lauds NDP leader's role in ending Toronto transit strike

A correspondent
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Public transit service resumed in Toronto Wednesday, after the leader of the Ontario New Democratic Party, Howard Hampton, brokered a deal to end a two-day strike by 7,700 Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) workers.

At Hampton's urging and with the consent of the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) leadership, the TTC workers' wage claim will now be subject to binding arbitration. Little, in fact, divides the two parties: the TTC has offered annual wage increases of 2 percent in each of the next three years; the ATU has scaled back the workers' initial demand of 16 percent over two years, to 3 percent per year for three years. The maneuvers and calculations that culminated in the TTC chairman and ATU Local 113 President Vince Casuti negotiating a back-to-work deal in Hampton's office bear close scrutiny, however, for they shed light on the labor bureaucracy's attitude to trade union rights and its opposition to Ontario's Tory provincial government.

On Monday evening and Tuesday, Hampton and the NDP came under sharp attack from the Tories and the big business media for not agreeing to a Tory proposal to recall the provincial parliament to legislate a speedy end to the strike. By Wednesday, however, Tory Premier Mike Harris, Transport Minister Jim Flaherty, and the media were singing Hampton's praises. It was generally recognized that the NDP, because of its ties to the labor bureaucracy, had been able to achieve the government's aim of ending the strike, but in a more expedient fashion that preserved the norms of collective bargaining. Even Terence Corcoran, an editorial board member at Conrad Black's *National Post* and notorious right-wing ideologue, lauded Hampton's deal, saying it "proved ... there will no big [wage] catch-ups" for Canadian workers. (Over the past decade the TTC

workers, and virtually all public sector workers in Canada, have suffered a sharp decline in their real wages as a result of a succession of wage freezes and wage cuts.)

The only dissenting voice was that of Dalton McGuinty, the leader of the Official Opposition Liberals. Sidelined by the media fawning over Hampton, McGuinty was reduced to accusing the NDP and Tories of "playing politics" with the strike.

Like McGuinty's Liberals, the social-democratic NDP had had no qualms about joining with the Tory majority in the legislature to strip the TTC workers of their right to strike. If the NDP did not consent to the recall of the legislature, it was only because it took exception to the Tories' stipulation that the arbitrator provided for under the proposed back-to-work legislation be a government nominee. The NDP argued the arbitrator should be mutually agreed upon by the union and TTC management.

By championing the traditional procedure for selecting arbitrators, the NDP hoped to boost its flagging support in the trade union officialdom.

But to Hampton's surprise, the Tories decided to play brinkmanship. Harris refused to recall the legislature unless the opposition agreed to pass the Tory bill without amendment, calculating, rightly, that the press could be counted on to blame the NDP for the stalemate and slam it for joining with the ATU in "holding the public hostage."

Skewed as was the press coverage of the NDP's stand, the social democrats' record is such that the big business media had little difficulty in ridiculing Hampton's professed defense of established collective bargaining rights and practices. After all, the Rae NDP government, in which Hampton served as a cabinet minister, stripped close to a million provincial public

workers of their elementary trade union rights under its wage-cutting "social contract" legislation. And earlier this month, the Saskatchewan NDP government passed legislation to break a nurses strike just hours after the nurses walked out.

If Hampton felt compelled to provide an alternative mechanism for ending the strike, it was not only because he was bowing to the right-wing media campaign. The NDP's action also upset the calculations of the ATU bureaucracy. According to press reports, the strike's ostensible leader, Local 113 President Casuti, "agonized," over the NDP's blocking of the recall of the legislature. He had been counting on a back-to-work law to lessen rank-and-file pressure that the ATU mount a struggle to end years of "austerity." Strange as Casuti's strategy might appear, it has in fact become something of a norm in Canada. The labor bureaucrats routinely rely on state intervention against strikes as a means of convincing the rank and file that further struggle is futile. Witness the crisis in the Ontario labor leadership in November 1997, when the courts refused to grant the Tories an injunction to break a province-wide teachers' strike.

With his deal to end the TTC strike, Hampton succeeded in serving the social democrats' two political masters--big business and the union bureaucracy. Any wonder then why the press went from denouncing the NDP for its role in the TTC strike, to saying its intervention was something of a political coup?



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