

Union orders Toronto city workers to end strike

A correspondent
11 April 2000

Toronto city workers have been ordered by their union to end a 10-day strike and return to work no later than the morning of Tuesday, April 11. Yet it will be days before the 18,500 workers learn the details of a proposed contract settlement, let alone have the opportunity to vote on it. And, the most important issue in dispute—the harmonization of wage rates in the newly-created mega-city—remains, in all likelihood, unresolved, making it subject to binding arbitration.

In announcing the strike's end, negotiators for Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 79 said they had agreed to send one issue to arbitration, but refused to divulge what that issue is. Still, in outlining the deal's "highlights," CUPE officials made no mention of wage harmonization and, both before and during the strike, they repeatedly urged arbitration be used to resolve the dispute between the city and its inside workers over equalizing wage rates.

The City, for its part, has no objection, at least in principal, to inside workers receiving the same pay for doing the same job. Its concern has been to ensure that wages are not harmonized significantly upward and that harmonization is phased in, not made retroactive to the mega-city's January 1998 birth. At present, hourly wage differentials of \$2 and more per hour are common among workers doing the same job.

The current contract negotiations are the first between Toronto and its 20,000 inside workers since Ontario's Tory government forced the amalgamation of the seven municipal administrations that comprised Metro Toronto into a single municipal government. Previously, the inside workers—who include clerical staff, public health nurses, daycare workers, ambulance drivers, building inspectors, and sewage treatment plant workers—were covered by 24 different contracts. Now they are subdivided into just four bargaining units.

Like other public sector workers in Ontario and across Canada, the inside workers saw their real wages decline significantly during the 1990s. Most Local 79 members last had a wage increase eight or more years ago. Thereafter, they were hit by the Ontario New Democratic Party government's wage-cutting "social contract" and then the Tories' public spending cuts, which included major reductions in provincial grants to municipalities.

The proposed contract will do little, if anything, to redress the fall in city workers' real wages. Before the strike began, union negotiators said they would accept the same wage package given outside workers last fall: a 2 percent pay increase for 1999, 2.17 percent this year, 3.2 percent in 2001, and a \$400 signing bonus.

According to the union, the city has given contractual commitments to provide the 8,000 lower-paid, part-time workers with more hours and to offer job training to anyone laid off.

Ontario's Tory government rammed through municipal amalgamation because it provided a means to slash services and sharply reduce the municipal workforce. CUPE never mounted a serious struggle to mobilize popular opposition to the municipal restructuring, nor to tie it to a broader struggle against the assault on social and public services being carried out by the Ontario Tory and federal Liberal governments.

CUPE opposed municipal amalgamation from the parochial perspective of defending the identity of the individual municipalities that comprised Metro Toronto. It made no attempt to link the municipal workers' struggle with that of public school teachers or with school board support staff, most of whom are CUPE members.

In the current dispute, the union all but entirely

ignored the provincial Tory government, while making it clear that CUPE will not stand in the way of further municipal job and service cuts. Said CUPE national President Judy Darcy, “Local 79 members are not on strike for jobs for life. That's not the issue. We're not saying jobs for life, but we sure as heck are saying that if workers are going to have their jobs restructured or be displaced that they should have the chance to move into another [municipal] job before hiring people off the street.”

Throughout the 10-day strike not only did the 1,500 Local 79 members deemed “essential employees,” and thus legally barred from striking, remain on the job; so too, did the 5,400-strong CUPE Local 416, which represents Toronto's outside workers.



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