

Strike collapses at Calgary Herald

Lee Parsons
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After eight months of a bitter first contract fight, the strike by about 90 workers at the *Calgary Herald* went down to ignominious defeat late last week. The strikers lost the fight for a union contract and now have the choice between a cash buyout or an uncertain future at the *Herald* with virtually no protections.

The vote to end the 236-day strike was widely split, with 32 percent voting to continue the fight despite the recent capitulation of their union on the key issue of seniority. They were offered the choice of returning to work with a union contract providing 1 or 2 percent wage hikes but no job security, or to oust the union with the option of a buyout package providing a maximum of 68 weeks pay and a minimum of 13 weeks.

With the vote to end the strike without a union it is expected that most will take the buyout, since it has been made clear that many jobs will be eliminated even if workers choose to return to work. Management has informed the union that the formerly 143-person newsroom will continue to employ the reduced staff of 90 to 95 that has been operating since the strike began last November.

A recent letter from *Herald* management to the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union (CEP), which led the strike, stated that "Formal performance standards dealing with everything from decorum to productivity have been put in place for every job category.... Reporters who are not capable of producing three assigned or enterprise stories in the course of a standard seven-hour shift without moving into overtime are deemed to be performing below standard."

Andy Marshall, president of CEP Local 115A, said, "[This] is chilling for journalists and employee rights generally. We think this could only have happened in the legislative and political environment that lives in Alberta, where the labour laws are weak and where

there is no will to enforce employee rights." The union has called the deal a surrender package.

But the defeat of the strike cannot be attributed solely to anti-labor laws in BC. Both the local and national union leaderships blocked any broader movement of the working class in defense of the *Calgary Herald* strikers, and the leaders of the other unions at the newspaper actually aided management in breaking the strike by newsroom employees.

Last month, the two Graphic Communications International Union (GCIU) locals, representing pressmen and distribution centre workers, voted to ratify the *Herald*'s settlement offer and union leaders sent their members across the newsroom employees' picket lines. The four-year deal accepted by the GCIU called for a total of 10.5 percent in wage increases, but included an increase in workloads for pressmen who will move from a four-day to a five-day workweek.

Despite pledges by Alberta and national unions to defend the *Calgary Herald* workers against the union-busting campaign by publishing magnate Conrad Black, the union officials did nothing outside of organizing a boycott campaign, a strategy that has led to numerous defeats for striking newspaper workers in Canada and the US.



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