

Canada: Worker critically injured by Navistar strike-breaking operation

A correspondent
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Navistar International's campaign to break a strike at its Chatham, Ontario, truck plant has claimed its first victims. On Monday, June 24, an employee of the professional strike-breaking firm London Protection International drove a van through a picket line established by strikers and their supporters at a staging area from which Navistar intended to bus scabs into the plant. Three picketers, all of them Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) union members from Windsor, Ontario, were hospitalized, one with critical injuries.

Not since 1945, has an auto producer in Canada hired scabs. Among the very first actions taken by the Tories when they came to power in Ontario in 1995 was to abolish the legal restrictions on the hiring of so-called replacement workers. This was of a piece with the raft of reactionary measures that the Tories have enacted, many of them specifically targeting trade union rights, workplace regulations, and labor standards.

Navistar's unionbusting has provoked an outcry across south-western Ontario. CAW members from Windsor, London, and other smaller auto-making centers have traveled to Chatham to join mass pickets. CAW President Buzz Hargrove has threatened to call on workers at other auto and aerospace plants to walk off the job and converge on Chatham, so as to ensure no scabs make it into the Navistar plant. "If we have to close down other employers and move some people into Chatham to protect our members and their families, we're going to do it. We've got 130,000 members in Ontario and we're going to call on every one of them if we need them.

"If Navistar can scab a large assembly plant, then none of our jobs, or our past collective bargaining gains, are safe. This is a fight for all of us."

The running down of the three CAW members was a calculated and completely unprovoked act of criminal

violence. Don Milner, the most seriously injured in the attack, suffered a broken pelvis, a broken arm and severe internal injuries requiring hours of surgery. According to witnesses, after the van's front tires had rolled over Milner, the van stopped, only to accelerate and pass over Milner with the back tires. It then sped off. The driver Steele Leacock, has been charged with dangerous driving.

CAW members in several cities staged demonstrations Tuesday to protest the picket line attack and Navistar's unionbusting. The company, for its part, shut down the Chatham plant for a day, then resumed operations on Wednesday using only management and office personnel. Navistar says, however, that after a "cooling down period" it may resume its efforts to produce trucks using scabs.

On June 21, three days after Navistar first attempted to bring in replacement workers, the company obtained a court injunction that limits the number of picketers at the plant to 50 and bars those who are not members of CAW Local 127 from the picket lines. The injunction also prohibits picketers from blocking the scabs' entry to the plant. Previously the strikers and their supporters had successfully barred the scabs from entering the plant with mass pickets and barricades. Although police did not intervene, two CAW officials were charged with assault for allegedly attacking a security guard at a replacement-worker staging-area.

Navistar has a unionized workforce of around 650 at its Chatham plant and is the largest employer in the town which is situated one-hour's drive north-east of Detroit. Limited production has continued since the strike began June 1 using management and office staff. They have turned out no more than 12 transport trucks a day as compared to 39 per day during normal operations.

Navistar International Corporation is a subsidiary of International Truck and Engine Corporation based in Warrenville, Illinois. The company, which in addition to its Canadian and US operations has plants in Mexico and Brazil, says it needs to trim \$28 million from its operating budget or it will be forced to permanently close the Chatham plant and shift production elsewhere. Some of the work normally done at the Chatham plant has already been moved to its factory in Escobedo, Mexico.

The company is demanding massive concessions in wages and benefits, including a \$6 an hour pay cut for production workers and a \$4 an hour cut for skilled trades. In addition, Navistar, taking advantage of recent Tory changes to the length of the legal workweek, wants to institute a compulsory 56 hour work-week and wants these concessions entrenched in a seven-year contract.

The struggle at Navistar is of critical importance for workers in Canada and across North America. It comes at a time when auto industry analysts are warning of significant over-capacity in the North American auto industry, which can only mean a new offensive on the part of the automakers to slash costs through layoffs, plant closures, and wage cuts. Navistar's unionbusting must be met by militant industrial action and, above all, by the independent and united political mobilization of autoworkers in Canada, the US and Mexico.

The greatest obstacle to the realization of such a program of struggle is the CAW leadership itself. Even as Hargrove is threatening to pull CAW members off the job in support of the Navistar workers, he is appealing to the Ontario Tory government—the same Tory government that abolished the ban on the use of scabs and which has spearheaded the big business offensive against the working class—to intervene in the Navistar strike. The CAW has reportedly offered to make substantial contract concessions, only not of the scope and scale demanded Navistar.

It is the corporatist and nationalist program pursued by Hargrove and the CAW leadership that has emboldened Navistar to attempt for the first time in more than a half-century to employ scabs at an auto assembly operation. The CAW leadership's response to the growing crisis in the auto industry has been to press for even closer collaboration with government and auto bosses. This week, Hargrove accepted appointment to a

federal government auto industry task force—the Canadian Automotive Partnership Council—that includes representatives of the Ontario government, the automakers and auto part sector and is charged with developing initiatives to boost the competitive position, i.e. profitability, of the Canadian auto industry.

The CAW's own "Auto Policy Campaign" is aimed, on the one hand, at pressuring the federal and Ontario governments to make tax concessions and outright grants to the Big Three so as to induce them to preserve and expand their assembly operations in Canada. And on the other, is an explicit appeal to the Big Three to recognize that due to the differential in the value of the Canadian and US dollars and Canada's state-financed health insurance program they can achieve a greater rate of return in Canada than south of the border and, therefore, should favor Canada in investment decisions.

Such a policy can only fatally undermine worker resistance and strengthen the hand of the auto bosses, as it pits Canadian, US and Mexican workers against each other in a fratricidal struggle over a shrinking number of jobs.



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