

Canadian auto union leaders isolate fight against Navistar union-busting

Jerry Isaacs, Walter Gilberti
6 July 2002

A bitter strike by production workers, members of Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) Local 127, at Navistar's Chatham, Ontario truck plant has entered its second month.

The Navistar plant, located in a largely working class community of 40,000, has become a test case for the Ontario Tories' 1995 anti-union legislation that allows companies to hire replacement workers during a work stoppage. For the first time in nearly half a century, management is threatening to use strikebreakers against workers at a major auto-related factory in Canada.

Navistar temporarily suspended efforts to bring strikebreakers into the plant after a member of the private security force hired by the company drove a van into a group of strike supporters on June 24, sending one of the workers to the hospital with a life-threatening injury. Navistar officials, however, have refused to resume negotiations and have not lifted the threat to bring in strikebreakers or shut down the plant permanently if workers do not accept wage cuts of up to \$10 an hour and other massive concessions.

The hospitalized worker, Don Milner, a 38-year-old father of two small children, remains in critical condition after undergoing two eight-hour surgeries to reconstruct his pelvis, bladder and shoulder, which were shattered in the attack. A spokesperson for Local 444 said Milner was placed under a medically induced coma so he would remain immobile during the delicate operations. At the time of this writing, he has still not regained consciousness. Two other workers, who received less serious injuries, were released from the hospital shortly after the incident.

In the face of this unprecedented attack, the CAW leadership—despite a threat by President Buzz Hargrove to call a province-wide strike of all auto workers—has left the strikers isolated in their battle against the US-based truck manufacturer. After honoring picket lines for one day when the strike began, office workers at the plant, members of CAW Local 35, were instructed by CAW officials to cross the picket lines and continue to work. CAW members at Navistar's parts depot in Burlington, Ontario have also been told to continue to work.

The CAW has made no effort to fight for industrial action by Navistar workers in the US or Mexico in solidarity with their Canadian brothers and sisters. For its part, the United Auto Workers in the US—whose ex-regional director Paul C. Korman sits on Navistar's board of directors as part of a corporatist deal with the company—has refused to organize solidarity action, despite the fact that the truck company is openly preparing similar attacks on workers in Ohio, Illinois, Indiana and other plants when the contract for thousands of Navistar workers in the US expires in September.

Since the strike began June 1, the 645 Chatham strikers have faced a gang-up of professional strikebreaking companies, anti-union injunctions, police repression and a corporation with huge resources to weather a long strike. The courts have granted the company injunctions limiting the number of pickets to 50, barring anyone except Local 127 members from the picket line and prohibiting workers from stopping vehicles for more than three minutes. Meanwhile, the anti-strike legislation has freed Navistar to import strikebreakers and private security thugs from across Canada and the US.

Strom Canada, based in Windsor, Ontario, is currently supplying the reserve of strikebreakers. Black-uniformed goons from London Protection International (LPI) have been hired by Navistar to protect the strikebreakers and provoke incidents that can be used to victimize and prosecute workers and impose further legal restrictions. LPI was involved in the bitter 1997 strike at Accuride Canada in London, Ontario; the 1999 *Calgary Herald* strike; and the 2001 walkout at ADM Agri Industries in Windsor.

The company has also hired the notorious strikebreaking company, Vance International. The US-based firm, which was set up by former US Secret Service agents and recruits mercenary and criminal types through ads in such publications as *Soldier of Fortune*, has a long history of violence against US workers, in major battles against union-busting of the 1980s and 1990s such as Greyhound, Pittston Coal, International Paper and the Detroit newspapers.

The company's demands were designed to provoke a strike. Navistar wants a seven-year contract that will guarantee Can\$43 million in cost reductions, including Can\$21 million in wage and benefit cuts and other concessions. The wage cuts alone average Can\$6 an hour for production workers and Can\$4 an hour for the skilled trades, with some workers, such as sweepers, facing cuts of Can\$10 an hour.

Navistar management also wants to impose a compulsory 56-hour workweek. It plans to establish 10-hour workdays with overtime penalties paid only after 40 hours of work in a week, rather than after eight hours in a single day. The company also wants to eliminate paid lunch breaks and gain unlimited power to impose overtime, use temporary workers and contractors, and introduce "flexible" work rules and scheduling.

As one Local 127 member put it, "A lot of the demands the company made in the first offer were designed to put us out on the street." Given the fact that Navistar has been busy moving production from its unionized plants in the US and Canada to low-wage plants in Mexico and nonunion facilities in the southern states of the US, the company's principal aim may be the closure of the Chatham plant.

Jim, a striker with almost 30 years at Navistar, voiced his suspicions about the company's agenda. "We have many workers who are close to retirement. More than a third of the workforce could retire in about a year and a half. We once had a company in Chatham called Motorwheel. The workers were told the company needed to cut wages, or they would have to close. The workers accepted it, and the company turned around and

closed the plant. As a result, the workers received lower severance pay.”

Behind these draconian demands are the Big Three auto makers, which have come to play a predominant role in truck manufacturing over the last several years, and the big investors on Wall Street and Toronto’s Bay Street, which are insisting that Navistar carry out a massive restructuring program following a loss of \$60 million in the last six months.

With slumping markets and factory overcapacity—existing North American capacity is estimated to be twice the size of the present demand for trucks—DaimlerChrysler (owner of Freightliner), GM (owner of Volvo and Mack Trucks) and Ford (which jointly produces medium trucks with Navistar and purchases diesel engines from the company), are all demanding a drastic reduction in jobs and production costs.

Both Canadian- and US-based transnational corporations, moreover, are determined to destroy whatever protections Canadian workers still retain. They want to impose the same conditions of “flexible” labor, longer work hours and part-time employment that have been imposed on the American working class as a result of two decades of strikebreaking and union-busting, beginning with the smashing of the PATCO air traffic controllers strike by President Reagan in 1981.

Navistar’s provocative actions have sparked widespread anger among workers throughout Ontario, including the 46,000 Big Three auto workers whose contracts expire on September 17. Many CAW workers—who have seen years of plant closings, layoffs and the erosion of working conditions and living standards—correctly see the struggle at Navistar as a precedent for an even greater assault against all auto workers.

On June 24 hundreds of CAW Local 444 workers from DaimlerChrysler plants in Windsor set up a mass picket on Highway 401 outside of Chatham, where strikebreakers were being loaded onto a bus to be shipped to the Navistar plant. Having failed on several previous occasions to bring strikebreakers into the plant, the company decided to resort to violence.

At 6:30 a.m. a van carrying scabs stopped in the middle of the road in front of several protesters. After waiting for more workers to gather in front of his vehicle, the driver, identified as LPI employee Steele Leacock, accelerated into the group, running over Local 444 member Don Milner and knocking down several other workers. Witnesses reported that after the front tires had run over Milner, the driver stopped and then spun his back tires over the fallen worker.

A Local 127 member told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “There were quite a few cars on both sides of the road. There was no picketing. We were simply there to discourage busloads of scabs from coming to the plant. The goons from LPI were driving back and forth. They kept turning around taking pictures, and taking down license plates. They come by just to antagonize you. We went up to one of the cars and without hesitation he pounced on the gas, hitting the three workers. There had been no threat of violence against the driver.”

Rather than indicting Leacock for attempted murder or some other serious felony charge, the police have merely charged him with three counts of “dangerous driving.”

Following the incident, under pressure from rank-and-file auto workers, CAW President Hargrove issued his threat to call out the 135,000 CAW members throughout Ontario in a sympathy strike, and then visited Chatham for the first time in the nearly one-month-long strike. He told the media, “This is the first time in our history we’ve put out an alert asking all our membership to be ready to put down their tools. Our problem isn’t getting them to put down their tools, our problem is keeping them in the plant until we tell them to come to Chatham.”

Fearful that Navistar’s actions threatened to provoke a wave of sympathy strikes and protests from auto workers throughout the province, several leading political and business figures urged the company to shift its tactics, and give the CAW leadership time to dampen the workers’ militancy and create conditions for the bulk of the company’s cost-cutting

demands to be imposed.

The day after the June 24 incident, Chatham Mayor Dianne Gagner met with company officials and called on them to halt the strikebreaking operation and return to the bargaining table. She later said, “Although it’s in their legal rights to bring in replacement workers, we requested they not do so at this time. The situation is very volatile and it can’t be managed. On Monday, union officials controlled the people at the site so it didn’t explode,” Garner said. “They can’t control it anymore.”

Even Labour Minister Brad Clark, appointed by Ontario Tory Premier Ernie Eves in April, “strongly” urged both sides to get back to negotiations.

After an appeal from Hargrove, Ford Motor Co. officials sent a letter to Navistar executives saying that Ford had a “positive and valued relationship with CAW-Canada” and that the auto company expected its suppliers “to treat their employees in a fair and equitable manner.” The letter added, “We also expect our suppliers to avoid conduct that violates federal or provincial labor and employment laws and to respect Ford Motor Company of Canada’s relationship with CAW-Canada.”

The message from the Ford officials to Navistar was clear. It could be summed up thusly: “Take a page from our book. It is more profitable and effective to utilize the services of the union bureaucracy than to smash the CAW altogether.”

The CAW has a long record of collaboration at the Navistar plant, which has paved the way for the current union-busting demands. In 1999, during the last contract negotiations, the CAW accepted the company’s demands to separate Navistar from the pattern set by the Big Three contracts. The following year Navistar began layoffs, which have destroyed 1,350 jobs since March 2000.

Moreover, the CAW played the key role in suppressing and politically emasculating the mass opposition to the Ontario Tory government, which came to power in 1995, thus allowing it to prepare the current offensive against the working class. The CAW, the largest private sector union in Canada, could have taken industrial and political action to bring down the Tories during the mass struggles by Ontario teachers and other workers against then-Premier Mike Harris in 1995-97.

If the current struggle at Navistar is not to be isolated and betrayed—with devastating results for the whole working class—auto workers must reject the pro-capitalist and nationalist perspective of the CAW and mobilize their strength against Navistar and its big business backers. A direct appeal must be made to US and Mexican Navistar workers to conduct an international campaign of strikes, demonstrations and other actions to defend the jobs and living standards of all Navistar workers.

This is not simply a battle against one union-busting employer, but rather a struggle against Canadian big business and the transnational corporations as a whole, as well as the Tory, Liberal and New Democratic parties, all of which defend the profit system. For such a struggle, Canadian workers need a genuinely independent working class party based on a socialist and internationalist program.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact