

Toronto: NDP and union leaders strangle city workers' strike

Keith Jones
15 July 2002

Leaders of the New Democratic Party, the Canadian Union of Public Employees and the Ontario Federation of Labour have joined forces with Ontario's Tory provincial government to write and enforce legislation breaking a strike by 22,000 Toronto municipal workers.

Late on the afternoon of July 11, the Ontario Legislature unanimously adopted legislation outlawing the strike by the City of Toronto's 6,800 outside workers and by 15,000 of its 18,000 inside workers. (3,000 of the inside workers are "essential" employees and legally barred from striking.)

The outside workers, who include trash collectors and parks and recreation employees, walked off the job June 26. The city's clerical staff, public health nurses, daycare and other inside workers joined the strike July 4.

No sooner had Bill 174 received royal assent, than the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) ordered the strikers to take down picket lines and report for work at their next scheduled shift. Under the legislation, an arbitrator will rule on all outstanding issues—including the city's demand for the gutting of restrictions on the contracting of work—should a brief mediation effort fail.

The social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP) is boasting that Bill 174 incorporates NDP proposals for arriving at a settlement "fair to both sides" and even hailing it as a "victory for Toronto and its workers." CUPE has been only slightly less gushing in its praise for a law that strips Toronto city workers of their basic trade union rights and sets a precedent for further state attacks on workers' right to strike and bargain collectively. "Ontario's NDP," declares the national CUPE web site, "worked hard to negotiate a fair process of mediation-arbitration.... At the eleventh hour ... a deal was brokered that will allow for a fair system."

These statements only underscore the extent to which the unions and NDP are buttresses of the existing social order. The breaking of the Toronto city workers' strike represents a major defeat for workers across Canada. Once again the Ontario Tory regime—since 1995 the spearhead of corporate Canada's assault on the working class—has survived a major political crisis.

In opposing the city administration's demand for the unfettered right to contract-out work, the Toronto city workers implicitly challenged the program of dismantling public and social services and removing all regulatory restraints on capital pursued by the entire political establishment, from the NDP to the Canadian Alliance, since the beginning of the 1990s.

Even the capitalist press conceded that the Tory provincial government was at the root of the strike. The Tories threw Canada's largest urban center into fiscal crisis by downloading responsibility for various services onto the province's municipalities without adequate

additional funding. They egged on the city administration to pursue contacting-out and privatization, while signalling their readiness to legislate against any strike.

If it was clear from the outset that the Toronto city workers were pitted against the provincial Tory government, it was equally evident that conditions were propitious for making the strike the catalyst for an industrial and political offensive of the working class aimed at driving the Tories from power. Although the suspension of city services meant hardship for many Torontonians, the attempts of the big business press and politicians to whip up anti-strike sentiment fell flat. More importantly, the strike unfolded within the context of a growing crisis for the international bourgeoisie fuelled by the puncturing of the stock market bubble and the ongoing revelations of fraud at Enron and WorldCom—a crisis that has caused US President George Bush to voice fears of the emergence of a political movement against the "free enterprise" system.

The Tory government has already been shaken by the growing popular backlash against corporate power and unfettered market rule. Last fall, Mike Harris announced he was resigning as premier and Tory leader after a public inquiry into the Walkerton water-poisoning tragedy indicated that it was going to find the Tories' privatization and deregulation of water testing and massive cuts to the Environment Ministry had directly contributed to the deaths of seven people. Since assuming office in April, Harris's successor and one-time finance minister, Ernie Eves, has been buffeted by demands from big business that his government intensify the assault on the working class and a growing public outcry over education cuts, hospital waiting lists and mounting social inequality.

Had the Toronto city workers aggressively identified their struggle with the defence of the entire working class, fighting consciously to make it the spearhead of a cross-Canada mobilization against the dismantling of all public and social services, including Medicare and public education, they would have elicited mass support.

The union and NDP leaders pursued a diametrically opposed course. They quarantined the city workers' struggle, confining it within the political straitjacket of collective bargaining and appeals to the big business politicians. This was graphically illustrated at a rally July 8. With rumours rife of an imminent back-to-work law, CUPE officials promoted the NDP as the political alternative to the Tories—no matter that this party had, when in office between 1990 and 1995, initiated massive public and social service cuts and adopted wage- and job-cutting "social contract" legislation against one million Ontario public sector workers, including Toronto's inside and outside workers.

Meanwhile, Canadian Auto Workers President Buzz Hargrove failed, in his address to the rally, to even mention the struggle against

union-busting at the Navistar truck plant in Chatham, which has left one CAW member critically injured. When challenged by a WSWs reporter as to why he hadn't drawn attention to Navistar's use of Tory legislation allowing the hiring of strike-breakers and 60-hour workweeks, Hargrove said he "didn't want to confuse the situation.... This is about the city workers, not about us."

In keeping with the pattern of public sector strikes over the past two decades, the union bureaucrats clearly intended to use the passage of an anti-strike law to argue that further struggle was futile and declare the city workers' struggle over. But their plans and those of the Tories were disrupted when a Ministry of Labour memo was leaked that revealed the government was considering naming Guy Giorno, chief of staff to former premier Mike Harris and a key architect of the Tory's reactionary "Common Sense Revolution," to the mediator-arbitrator post to be created by a back-to-work law.

The strikers were irate, for they recognized Girono would rubber-stamp the city's demands. Fearing that the strike could spin out of their control, the union and NDP leaders then set about convincing the Tories that they had a common interest in designing a mechanism to corral the strikers back to work.

As a smokescreen for these manoeuvres, CUPE officials suggested their compliance with an anti-strike law was not guaranteed, while the NDP threatened not to permit normal parliamentary procedure to be waived. This would have delayed passage of Bill 174 for a week or more. Ultimately, all three parties in the Ontario legislature, CUPE and the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) were drawn into the plot. According to Ontario NDP leader Howard Hampton, the pivotal role was played by Ross McClellan, a former NDP member of the Ontario legislature and current high-level OFL official. On the morning of the July 11, he telephoned Eves' chief of staff with a proposal as to how the labour bureaucrats and Tories could join forces to quell the strike. Later Premier Eves spoke personally with McClellan and with Ontario NDP leader Howard Hampton to hammer out the key details of the deal under which the social democrats voted for Bill 174 and CUPE then ordered an immediate end to the strike.

Bill 174 is a draconian, anti-worker law. Any city worker who remained on strike would be liable to fines of up to \$3,000 per day. The legislation expressly empowers the government to name whomever it wants to arbitrate any outstanding issues in the dispute between Toronto and its workforce. The arbitrator is legally instructed to weigh Toronto's ability to finance any award within its budgetary parameters, including current taxation levels. And the legislation empowers the city to use private contractors—the key issue in the strike—to clean up the current backlog of garbage, if it deems insufficient progress is made in the first five days after the strikers are back on the job.

All this is tempered by a letter from the premier pledging that the government will name the mediator-arbitrator from a list of three individuals approved by the Tories, Liberals, NDP, CUPE and the city administration. The three all have years of experience in working with the union bureaucracy, government and business in negotiating corporatist arrangements that ensure the needs of big business while preserving the unions as a mechanism for containing and controlling worker discontent.

Leading off the 46-minute special legislative session that saw Bill 174 unanimously pass through all three readings, Premier Eves pointed to the unprecedented collaboration between the three parties that had produced the strike-breaking law. ONDP leader Hampton returned the compliment. "Good work," he told his parliamentary

colleagues, "has been done by a lot of people, and a lot of people deserve credit for that."

Needless to say, all this happened behind the backs of the 22,000 strikers. Nor, once Bill 174 became law, were they in any way consulted before CUPE pulled the plug on strike.

These events have provided a graphic illustration of the true relations between the labour bureaucracy and the Tory government. The Tories have been able to pursue their right-wing offensive over the past seven years only because the unions and social-democratic NDP have systematically suppressed the class struggle.

But this truth demands consideration of a second question: Why was there no opposition from the rank-and-file to the scuttling of the strike?

In drawing the lessons of the Toronto city workers strike, it is necessary to recognize that workers have yet to draw the fundamental lessons of the past two decades of bitter defeats and reversals.

The corporate and state offensive against the working class is a worldwide phenomenon. It cannot be seriously resisted, let alone defeated, through trade union struggles against individual employers and fought on a local or national basis.

The power and creative potential of the working class will only be revealed when it is mobilized as an independent political force, through the building of a mass socialist party. In answer to the claims of big business that the current already inadequate level of public and social services is unsustainable, the working class must advance its own program to radically reorganize the economy. If the key economic levers were brought under the democratic control of working people, the technological revolution could be transformed from a weapon of capital in slashing jobs and intensifying exploitation into a means of ensuring the basic needs of all.

A genuine working class party would be the opposite of the social-democratic NDP. The political vehicle of the trade union bureaucracy, the NDP promotes reactionary Canadian nationalism and claims that the interests of working people can be reconciled with private ownership of the banks and basic industry. In practice, the social democrats systematically subordinate the interests of working people to the profits of a few and, in times of crisis, as exemplified by the Toronto city workers' strike, use saccharine phrases about social justice and state repression to suppress working class struggle.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact