

Striking Toronto city workers rally

A WSWS reporting team
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More than 2,000 striking city workers and their supporters rallied in front of the Toronto City Hall Monday to press their demands for job security and to oppose plans to privatize city services. Nearly 7,000 outside workers, including trash collectors, parks and recreation employees and ferry service workers, began the walkout on June 26 and were joined July 4 by 15,000 inside workers, including day care workers, public health nurses and clerical staff.

The demonstration took place as the city council, backed by the Tory provincial government of Ontario, stepped up its efforts to end the strike and impose its demands. On Monday, the right-wing majority on the city council passed a resolution calling on Mayor Mel Lastman to issue an ultimatum to the two locals of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). The right-wing councillors demanded that the union call a membership vote on the last offer or the city would remove any and all job security provisions from its contract proposal.

“If the union doesn’t give in to this demand by Friday, the city should take back its offer, and the next one won’t be as favourable to employees,” warned Councillor Paul Sutherland. “A growing number of councillors think the city has already offered too much and would like to see the job-security provisions taken back,” added Councillor David Shiner.

In addition, the *Toronto Star* reported Tuesday that members of Ontario parliament were preparing to intervene to end the strike with back-to-work legislation as early as July 15. The newspaper said Tory MPPs expect the government to announce Friday that the legislature is being recalled. Deputy Mayor Case Ootes confirmed that the city had been in touch with provincial officials to discuss when and if the government would intervene.

Government officials will only say publicly that they will act when the province’s medical officer of health, Dr. Colin D’Cunha, declares that uncollected garbage constitutes a health threat, or if reduced ambulance services place people at risk. But some Tories have admitted to other concerns. “We are certainly cognizant of the upcoming visit by the Pope and it may prove to be a motivating factor in due course,” said Attorney-General David Young, the Tory MPP for the riding of Willowdale.

On July 5 the medical officer ordered the cleanup of three garbage dumps and the city obtained an injunction barring strikers from preventing private contractors from removing trash at the sites. On Saturday morning, however, pickets at one site stopped contractors from hauling away the garbage.

CUPE Local 416 President Brian Cochrane, who represents the outside workers, says he expects back-to-work legislation to be introduced early this week. Ann Dembinski, head of Local 79—representing inside workers—says the Tory government has been egging on the city administration: “We know that [the city is] being pressured by Queen’s Park [the seat of the provincial parliament] to

privatize services. So we are wondering, was there a deal to attempt to bust the union and privatize services?”

The strike by the Toronto city workers is the latest expression of mass opposition to the right-wing, free market policies of the Tory government. Since coming to power in 1995, the Tories have slashed public and social services, gutted welfare provisions and rewritten labor and employment standards legislation to facilitate strikebreaking and the imposition of 50- and 60-hour workweeks.

Striking workers at Monday’s protest carried signs denouncing privatization, the attack on education and the looting of public funds to finance tax breaks for big business and profits for private companies. Several referred to the privatization of water testing by the Ontario Tories, which contributed to the deaths of seven people in Walkerton from e-coli contamination in May 2000.

Workers at the rally expressed anger towards the strikebreaking legislation being prepared against them. One striker said, “If they legislate us back to work they will be taking our right to strike away. We have to fight the government.” The slightest hint from the speakers’ platform that the union might resist strike-breaking legislation was met with widespread cheers and applause.

CUPE’s Ontario secretary-treasurer, Brian O’Keefe, said such legislation would be a declaration of “war” that “labor will never accept.” Local 416’s Cochrane praised his members and said they were prepared to “take on the province regarding any effort to legislate an end to the strike.” However, none of the speakers explicitly stated that the unions would defy a back-to-work order, let alone how they would resist such an attack.

The union officials did not offer any viable political strategy to mobilize the working class against the Tories and their right-wing policies. None of the speakers, who included Ontario Public Service Employees Union President Leah Casselman, Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) President Buzz Hargrove and others, called for the bringing down of the Tory government. At most, they suggested, workers should circulate petitions to pressure right-wing councillors and MPPs to drop privatization plans.

Rather than using the Toronto city workers’ strike as the starting-point of an industrial and political offensive by the working class against the Tories, the union officials sought to keep the strike confined within the most narrow limits, isolated from other struggles. CAW President Hargrove did not even refer to the bitter Navistar strike in Chatham, Ontario. The truck maker, using legislation passed by the Tories abolishing restrictions on the use of strike-breakers, is waging a violent campaign against CAW Local 127 members, demanding wage cuts of up to \$10 an hour. Last month a professional strike-breaker ran down and critically injured a strike supporter.

Asked by a WSWS reporter why he failed to make any appeal to unite the struggles of the Navistar and Toronto city workers, Hargrove responded, “I didn’t want to confuse the situation. They have a tough

struggle here. This is about the city workers, not about us.”

More significantly, union officials used the rally to promote the discredited New Democratic Party (NDP) before the strikers, claiming that the social democrats represented a political alternative to the Tories. Former mayor of East York and NDP MPP Michael Prue was one of the speakers, and several other leading NDP officials were present on the platform, including Jack Layton, a city councillor who plans to run for the federal leadership of the NDP.

The union bureaucracy’s promotion of the NDP is aimed at preventing a genuine political mobilization of the working class against the Tories and big business. Faced with a back-to-work bill, Ontario Federation of Labour and CUPE officials may very well tell workers that further industrial action is futile and that the solution is to vote for the NDP at the next election, which need not be held until June 2004.

Indeed industrial action alone is insufficient and workers need to conduct a political struggle against the Tories. But the NDP is a capitalist party, which demonstrated its hostility to the working class when it held power in Ontario from 1990 to 1995. The NDP government, headed by Premier Bob Rae, prepared the political terrain for the coming to power of the Tories in 1995 on an explicitly right-wing program. The NDP shredded its own program of minimal reforms, Rae declaring *à la* Thatcher that there was “no alternative” to the big business program of slashing public and social service budgets. The NDP implemented massive cuts, suspended basic trade union rights and began the introduction of workfare. The Rae regime also initiated the deregulation and privatization of water-testing that led to the Walkerton tragedy.

In a similar fashion an NDP government in British Columbia opened the door to the election of a right-wing Liberal government that takes as its model the Harris Tory regime. The former NDP premier of Saskatchewan, Roy Romanow, is currently heading a Royal Commission that in the name of “saving” Medicare is considering delisting medical services and procedures, imposing user fees and giving for-profit companies a much greater role in the management and provision of health care.

Many workers at the rally were eager to discuss a new political strategy for the working class. Supporters of the WSWS distributed hundreds of copies of editorial board statement, “Toronto strike at the crossroads: Answer government strikebreaking with an industrial-political offensive against the Tories!”

Afterwards several workers spoke with the WSWS.

A nurse at Seton House, originally from the West Indies, said, “I know what happens when you privatize. Your wages are cut 30 or 40 percent. But your bills, your mortgage doesn’t change. Are you supposed to tell them: I don’t have enough? It doesn’t work that way. Why should we have our pay cut?”

“Workers have to keep their eyes open, and keep their heads together. We have to pay attention to what the unions do. Sometimes workers don’t even know how it works out in the end.”

A Canadian National Railway worker commented, “I’m here to support the city workers. It’s terrible. What’s wrong with a ‘job for life’? The politicians can be sure they’ll get paid all their lives. They’re not worried. They want to move people around, casualize them. I know about the Navistar strike. It’s the same issues.

“The union leaders talk big here. It’s hard to say what they’ll do. The unions have gone downhill, there’s no question about that. In the railways we’ve gone from 130,000 to 28,000 workers in the past few decades. There were bitter strikes in the 1970s. We’ve regained a

little ground.

“I think the NDP is the labor party, but I know what Rae did here. His government was a mess, and I agree, he opened the way for Harris and the Tories. I’m not sure what to do politically. There’s going to be a big fight. Heads will be cracked before this is over.”

Rob, a striking solid waste management worker, said, “It’s messed up, that’s for sure. They want to privatize, eliminate people. This business about ‘jobs for life’ is just public relations. But, anyway, why shouldn’t people have decent jobs that last a while? I just started on the job, obviously I would have no security at all.

“The city keeps saying, ‘No money, no money,’ but they had enough to give the police a big raise. And the politicians give themselves double-digit raises.

“If the provincial government passed back-to-work legislation, I think the workers would fight it. That’s the general mood. The tactic of the city has been to wait for the provincial government to bail them out, to have a mediator who is friendly to their side.”

Krystal, a social worker, said, “Half the social workers are on strike, half aren’t. I’m not. We have long hours, and get no respect for what we do. The politicians have no idea about the toughness of the job. They would never do the jobs we do. They would never give up their job security.

“It’s the ‘privilegeness’ of their position that gets me. The conditions of city workers are difficult and there’s zip respect. Just callousness.

“The conditions in Toronto are deteriorating. We see it. We see the effects, not simply on paper, but in its living manifestation, in the people we deal with. I counsel youth, 15 to 25 years old. Management doesn’t know anything. They try, but they don’t know anything.”

A commuter rail worker said, “I don’t agree with what Lastman is doing to the city workers. All they want is decent wages and conditions and some job security. It is long overdue that we act to bring down the Tories. But there is no party that represents the working people. When the NDP was in, we had ‘Rae Days’ [unpaid days off imposed on thousands of public sector workers by then Premier Bob Rae].”



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