

Toronto city workers strike against sweeping concession demands

Keith Jones
23 June 2009

More than 24,000 Toronto municipal workers—members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees locals 79 and 416—launched strike action shortly after midnight Sunday to oppose the city’s sweeping concession demands.

The strike, which involves both “inside” and “outside” workers, has caused a halt to garbage collection in Canada’s largest city, forced the closure of 57 city-run daycare centers, shut down municipal swimming pools and recreational activities, and affected a broad array of other municipal services.

Mark Ferguson, president of Local 416, which represents 6,200 outside workers, accused the city of forcing a strike. “We believe,” said Ferguson, “it’s been their intent to put us out on the streets all along.”

The city, says Local 79 President Ann Dembinski “has been using the recession as an excuse to rip our collective agreement to pieces.”

There is no question that the city, egged on by big business and the corporate media, has been seeking a confrontation with the city workers. The city has presented negotiators for Local 416 with more than 100 pages of concession demands. In the name of greater “flexibility,” the city wants to be able to disregard seniority rights in making work assignments and laying workers off.

Although the two sides have been negotiating for the past six months, the city did not even table a wage offer until 9:30 PM Sunday, that is with less than three hours remaining before the strike deadline.

Neither side has divulged the details of that offer, but it clearly fell far short of the 3 percent annual wage increases accorded other Ontario public sector workers in recent contract settlements.

“The world has changed,” declared Toronto Mayor David Miller at a news conference in the wee hours of Monday morning. “The city has extremely serious budget challenges. One needs only to look at our welfare rolls to understand that.”

Miller, who is closely aligned with the social-democratic

New Democratic Party (NDP), would not rule out an eventual appeal to the provincial Liberal government to enact an emergency back-to-work law to break the strike and impose binding arbitration. Said Miller, “There are rules about (provincially-imposed arbitration) and from my perspective it’s far too early to be speaking about that.”

A two-week long strike of Toronto municipal employees in 2002 was broken by back-to-work legislation and in April 2008, all three parties in the Ontario legislature joined together to outlaw a strike by 9,000 Toronto Transit Commission workers after just 36 hours.

Big business is clamouring for the Ontario and Toronto governments to employ even more aggressive tactics against the striking city workers.

The Toronto Board of Trade issued a press release noting that cities across the United States have announced large scale layoffs and all but proposed that Toronto should threaten its city workers with the same so as to extort concessions from them.

In an open letter to Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty and Mayor Miller, the president of the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, Catherine Swift, urged the Ontario government to permanently strip the Toronto city workers of the right to strike: “I urge you to prevent this unjustifiable work stoppage. Further, I urge you to move to expand the list of ‘essential services’ for which strikes cannot and will not be tolerated.”

Mayor Miller’s reference to burgeoning welfare rolls in his initial post-strike statement is part of an ongoing big business campaign to depict the Toronto city workers and indeed any workers who resist their attempts to use the capitalist crisis to destroy worker rights as “selfish” ingrates who are indifferent to the large numbers of workers who have been thrown onto the unemployment lines since last fall.

The reality of course is that Canada’s economic and political elite are intent on boosting profits and dividends by driving down the wages and working conditions of all workers and toward that end they have been ruthlessly

slashing jobs and making increasingly draconian concession demands.

The Toronto city workers, like the GM and Chrysler workers who were forced to make drastic contract concessions this spring, are being made the target of a media campaign of vilification that cynically seeks to exploit the inequities and suffering caused by the capitalist crisis.

The corporate media has focussed its propaganda against the city workers on a system that allows them to “bank” unused sick days and, if those days remain unused in future years, to cash them out on retirement at half their value.

The media all but completely ignores the city’s other concession demands and deliberately omits to mention that the city workers do have not a proper short-term disability plan. If a city worker falls seriously ill, he or she must use up all their Employment Insurance benefits (i.e. endure months at barely 50 percent of their regular wage and without medical benefits) before being entitled to draw “Long Term Disability.” By “banking” sick days workers give themselves some protection against such an eventuality.

Typical of the media campaign against the City of Toronto workers was a column Marcus Gee penned for last Saturday’s *Globe and Mail*. Gee usually writes only about foreign affairs and international business—he was the *Globe*’s most enthusiastic drummer for the US’s 2003 illegal invasion of Iraq—but on Saturday he took a run at the inside and outside municipal workers, the most poorly remunerated group of city employees, claiming that they live in “cloud-cuckoo land” for wanting to cling to “plush” “entitlements” in the midst of “the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression.”

Gee claims that with the City of Toronto facing a likely shortfall in next year’s budget of between \$350 and \$500 million there is simply no money to maintain city workers’ current working conditions.

But if the government of Toronto, Canada’s wealthiest city, has “no money” one key reason is that over the past two decades NDP, Conservative and Liberal provincial governments have reduced grants to municipalities, while offloading significant responsibilities, so as to slash the taxes of big business and the highest-income earners. This has been part of a systematic drive by the ruling elite to dismantle the welfare state and slash taxes so as to redistribute an ever greater share of the national income from working people to the rich and super-rich.

The corporate media’s campaign against the Toronto city workers and the growing calls from business for the Ontario Liberal government to outlaw the strike attest to the fact that in opposing the city’s concession demands, the city workers are challenging the entire economic and political establishment.

Such a struggle can be won only in so far as city workers recognize this and respond by making their struggle the spearhead of an industrial and political offensive of the entire working class against the big business agenda of dismantling public and social services, slashing jobs, and gutting wages and working conditions.

No more than any other section of the ossified official labor movement is the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) willing or capable of leading such a struggle.

The pro-capitalist labor bureaucracy has responded to the economic crisis by shifting still further right. CUPE was a strong supporter of last December’s accord under which the NDP would have served as the junior partner of a Liberal-led national coalition government committed to “fiscal responsibility,” implementing the Conservative government’s \$50 billion five-year corporate tax cut package, and waging war in Afghanistan.

Yesterday, CUPE agreed to impose a 21-month wage freeze on 6,800 Air Canada flight attendants and to join with the air line in pressing the federal government to waive the company’s pension contributions.

The 1,800 City of Windsor workers, who walked off the job in April to fight concession demands, have been left by the CUPE leadership to fight alone. No attempt was made to link their struggle to that of the GM and Chrysler workers, whom the federal Conservative and provincial Liberal governments blackmailed, with the connivance of the Canadian Auto Workers, into making massive concessions by threatening to force the automakers into bankruptcy.

A bold appeal to the working class for support and common action in defence of jobs and public services and against the Harper Conservative and McGuinty Liberal governments would win mass support. But such an appeal will only be made if rank-and-file workers break through the “collective-bargaining” straitjacket in which CUPE is seeking to constrain their struggle.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact