

Striking Toronto city workers: management is “after everything”

A WSWWS reporting team
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Twenty-four thousand City of Toronto inside and outside workers, now in their fourth day of strike action, are resisting a concerted drive on the part of the economic and political elite of Canada’s wealthiest city to impose major contract concessions.

These include a wage freeze, the weakening of seniority rights, and the elimination of a scheme (meant to discourage absenteeism) that allows workers to bank unused sick days and cash them in on retirement.

For weeks, the corporate press has been filled with op-ed pieces and editorials denouncing the “excessively generous” benefits accorded the modestly paid municipal workers and cynically contrasting their position to that of the hundreds of thousands of workers whom big business has cut from its payrolls since last October.

Typical was an editorial posted this week on the *National Post* website. Titled “Toronto’s delusional city workers,” the editorial bluntly declared, “Toronto’s civic workers should just be grateful they have jobs.”

The *Post* and the *Toronto Sun* are urging that the city, led by New Democratic Party aligned Mayor David Miller, go beyond its current concession demands and threaten the city workers with a systematic campaign to privatize municipal services. In the borough of Etobicoke, where garbage collection was privatized prior to the creation of a unified Metro Toronto under one civic government, workers have no paid sick days, make up to \$7 per hour less, and receive overtime pay only after working 50 hours in a given week.

Meanwhile, the liberal *Toronto Star* has urged that Mayor Miller convene an emergency meeting of the city council to rollback the \$2350 annual pay raise city councillors recently voted themselves, arguing that such action would bolster the city’s campaign for concessions. Declared the *Star* in an editorial published Tuesday, “Mayor David Miller correctly argues that public sector unions shouldn’t expect pay raises and concession-free contracts when private sector workers—and taxpayers—are facing layoffs, plant closings, and rollbacks of their pay and benefits.... Regrettably, Miller and his hand-picked executive committee undermined that sound argument earlier this year in allowing city councillors to pocket a 2.4 per

cent raise, boosting their annual salaries from \$96,805 to \$99,153.”

In an earlier editorial the *Star* said that if municipal workers persisted in pressing for 3 percent annual wage increases—that is parity with other recent public sector wage settlements—they would be preparing the terrain for a “Mike Harris-style revolution.”

Ontario’s premier from 1995 to 2002, Harris led a regime modeled after those of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. It rewarded big business and the rich with huge tax cuts, slashed welfare benefits and health care and education budgets, and attacked worker rights.

With capitalism mired in its greatest crisis since the Great Depression and governments at the federal, provincial, and municipal levels all facing massive budget deficits, big business is determined to inflict a major defeat on the Toronto city workers so as to lay the groundwork for a fresh assault on public and social services.

Even before the Toronto city workers—members of Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Locals 79 and 416—walked off the job, significant sections of big business were urging the provincial Liberal government to recall the Ontario Legislature to adopt emergency strikebreaking legislation and give an arbitrator the power to dictate the city workers’ contracts.

Other establishment voices have opposed this, complaining that arbitrators often split the difference between employer and union proposals, resulting in settlements that are “too favourable” to the workers..

First elected in 2003, Dalton McGuinty’s Liberal government enjoys the tacit and in many cases open support of the unions, even though it has left in place the key pillars of Harris’ “Common Sense Revolution.”

For the moment, McGuinty is spurning the calls for strikebreaking legislation, although his government has twice resorted to such legislation in the past 14 months, breaking strikes of Toronto Transit Commission workers and York University teaching assistants and non-tenured teaching staff. McGuinty, it need be added, joined with the federal Conservative government earlier this spring to threaten GM and Chrysler workers with the loss of their jobs and pensions if they didn’t accept unprecedented wage and benefit cuts.

In the current conflict, McGuinty is calculating that the furious press propaganda campaign and the pliant union bureaucracy will weaken the strikers' resolve.

CUPE is constraining the Toronto city workers' struggle within the most narrow and politically impotent collective bargaining perspective. The union has said nothing about the threat of an Ontario government back-to-work bill, signalling thereby that it will meekly surrender before it. And it has mounted no campaign to mobilize the working population of Toronto by alerting the public to the connection between the defence of public sector workers' jobs and working conditions and the defence of the public services they administer.

At a rally at Toronto City Hall yesterday, attended by 500 strikers and their supporters, none of the speakers would even criticize Toronto's purportedly "labour friendly" mayor. Along with Canadian Auto Workers President Kew Lewenza, who joined with Harper and McGuinty in blackmailing the GM and Chrysler workers into accepting concessions, and other bureaucrats, CUPE gave an honored place on the platform to the head of the notoriously rightwing Toronto Police Association.

A representative of the 1,800 Windsor City workers—fellow CUPE members who have been on strike since April—also appeared on the platform, but was not asked to address the rally.

Ontario CUPE Division President Syd Ryan, a perennial NDP candidate known for giving bombastic "militant" speeches, vowed that "CUPE does not negotiate concessions." But just this week CUPE reached a tentative agreement with Air Canada that would freeze flight attendants' wages for 21 months, while giving the union's sanction to a delay hundreds of millions of dollars in pension payments.

In the case of the current dispute, the CUPE leadership has repeatedly expressed its willingness to work with the Miller administration to achieve its objective of increased "efficiencies" in the delivery of services. "We have spent months trying to find solutions that will accommodate [the City] without stripping you of any of your rights," declares a Local 416 bargaining update from earlier this month.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke with strikers at yesterday's rally at city hall.

Jack, a garbage collector, said, "Look at Etobicoke. They privatized collections there. All these right-wingers are saying what a great thing that was. The papers are full of that crap. But look at the conditions. Those guys work longer hours than us, make about five bucks less an hour, get screwed on their overtime and, listen to this, get absolutely no sick days. Yeah, that's right. You stay home sick in Etobicoke and you don't get paid.

"What gets me is that these are union jobs, too. Things are going downhill, man. Unions are signing deals where you don't get paid if you stay home sick. I tell you, that sure makes me sick just to think about it".

Jim, who works for the city parks department, told the WSWs, "They're taking advantage of this recession to come down on us. It's a simple political move. All we got to do is ride it out. (Mayor) David Miller is a wolf in sheep's clothing. They say it's just a timing thing but they're determined to take away what we have—the ways it has always been."

The previous day Bill, a picket captain for inside workers organized by CUPE 79, spoke to a WSWs reporter. "The City," said Bill "wants to gut our collective agreement. They're going after everything—pensions, benefits, seniority. We still don't know what kind of wage offer they're making.

"Our local supported Miller in the last election and if he doesn't do the right thing, he can forget about support in next year's election. I just don't get it. They've got scabs coming in already to clean up. Only two months ago they settled with twelve hundred workers at Metro Housing and there was no talk about taking concessions because of this recession. But now they are coming after us.

"Metro Housing settled for the same sick pay policy as what they're trying to take away from us. All of a sudden our benefits are too rich. It would be different if they offered a decent short term sick policy but that's not on the table either.

"They're coming after everybody now. The LCBO [Liquor Control Board of Ontario]: the guys at De Havilland. City workers in Windsor have been out since April. Our CUPE local just took concessions at Air Canada the other day. I just don't know what's going to happen next."

The authors also recommend:

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