

# What is behind the media's venomous attack on striking Toronto city workers

Keith Jones  
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Toronto's 24,000 city workers, now in their second week of strike action, have been the target of a concerted, venomous attack by Toronto's corporate media.

Day after day, the *Globe and Mail*, *National Post*, *Toronto Sun*, and *Star* have churned out columns and editorials castigating the modestly paid inside and outside workers for "enjoy[ing] perks that others can only dream of"—perks like the "notorious" paid sick days that they "selfishly" refuse to give up.

The corporate dailies have never been known for their sympathy for workers' struggles. But the press campaign against the city workers is nonetheless extraordinary for its ferocity and brazen hypocrisy.

Columnists earning six-figure salaries writing for dailies that serve as mouthpieces for some of Canada's wealthiest capitalists—Ken Thomson (*Globe*), Karl Péladeau (*Sun*), the Aspers (*National Post*)—are railing against the purported "injustice" of city workers balking at the city's demands for concessions—a wage freeze, benefit cuts, the weakening of seniority rights, and an increased workload—while others have lost their jobs or had their savings wiped out by the capitalist crisis.

The ruling class anger is palpable.

The *Globe's* Marcus Gee argues "a back-to-work order would be bad news for Toronto" since precedent indicates an arbitrator would not impose all of the concessions demanded by the city. Only a going of the workers is acceptable.

"[T]here is rising concern," declares the *Star's* Richard Gwyn, "that public sector workers have too much control," in a column that compares the reputed current public mindset in Toronto to that in Britain on the eve of Margaret Thatcher's coming to power.

Gee and Gwyn, it should be noted, are notorious propagandists for the bourgeoisie. Both were enthusiastic supporters of the Iraq war, with many a column to their

name promoting the lie that Saddam Hussein was sitting atop weapons of mass destruction.

What has raised the ire of the ruling elite is that by resisting concessions Toronto city workers are challenging big business' drive to make working people bear the burden of the capitalist crisis.

The scope and tenor of the press campaign against the Toronto city workers must be taken by them and by the working class as a whole as a warning as to what is at stake in the current strike.

Big business wants to inflict a major defeat on the Toronto city workers so as to intimidate workers in Ontario and across Canada into accepting wage and benefit cuts and speedups.

But this is only one part of the ruling class' agenda. Already there is a growing clamour from big business over the spiralling federal, provincial and municipal deficits produced by the economic slump.

On being named as the head of the Canadian Council of Chief Executives, the country's most powerful business mouthpiece, former Liberal finance minister and deputy prime minister John Manley promptly declared that eliminating deficits must be governments' next top priority.

Manley was a prominent member of the Chrétien-Martin Liberal government that between 1995 and 1997 implemented the greatest social spending cuts in Canadian history, then in 2000 rewarded big business and the rich with the biggest ever tax cuts.

A major theme of the press commentary on the city strike, a theme on which Gwyn's invocation of Britain's so-called winter of discontent was but a variation, is that worker resistance to concessions may result in, i.e. lead the bourgeoisie to promote, a new "Harris-style revolution." Ontario's premier from 1995 to 2002, Harris led an unabashedly rightwing regime, modelled after those of Ronald Reagan and Thatcher, that victimized

welfare recipients, slashed social and public services, and attacked the unions. As if on cue, Ontario's Conservatives elected a Harris protégé, Tim Hudak, as their leader in a vote Saturday.

From the standpoint of the ruling class, the attack on the workers who administer public and social services is a pivotal step in implementing their plans to resolve the state's fiscal crisis through massive social spending cuts.

If Toronto city workers are to defeat concessions, they must recognize the need to make their strike the spearhead of a struggle of the entire working class against the ruling elite's attempts to place the full burden of the capitalist crisis on working people.

In particular they must champion the connection between the defence of the public and social services that they administer and their own rights and wages. The reality is that the expansion of the welfare state in the 1960s and early 1970s was very much a product of militant working class struggles, including a series of strikes, many of them wildcats, by newly-organized public sector workers.

The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) leadership is pursuing a diametrically opposed course. It is doing everything to maintain and constrain the Toronto city workers' struggle within the most narrow collective bargaining framework.

It is an open secret that CUPE, whatever it says publicly, is not averse to the Liberal provincial government ending the strike with a back-to-work law, calculating that a government-imposed order will split the difference between the employer's and the union's demands.

This is a reactionary and stupid strategy.

Earlier this spring Dalton McGuinty's Liberal government joined hands with the federal Conservative government to extort unprecedented concessions from GM and Chrysler workers by threatening to push the automakers into bankruptcy and liquidation. McGuinty played a pivotal role in this anti-working class assault, announcing that in the event either company went bankrupt the Ontario government would renege on a three-decades-old pledge to partially guarantee defined pension benefits.

By deliberately isolating the Toronto city workers' strike and a three-month-long strike by 1,800 Windsor municipal workers, the CUPE leadership is all but inviting McGuinty not just to use emergency legislation to break the strikes, but to invoke the recession emergency to change the rules of the game. While traditionally

arbitrators have not imposed major giveaways, there is no question the corporate media would heartily applaud were the government to so word the back-to-work legislation as to instruct the arbitrator to impose the concessions demanded by the city. For example, McGuinty could tell the arbitrator he has to base his decision on the city's ability to pay, then announce that the Ontario government will not make up the projected \$350 million shortfall in the municipal budget.

The CUPE-supported New Democratic Party (NDP), meanwhile, has maintained a studied silence about the strike and the actions of Toronto's mayor, David Miller, who was an NDP member until 2007 and continues to maintain close ties to the party leadership and the union bureaucracy. The Ontario NDP's website makes no mention of the strike whatsoever, an unmistakable sign that the NDP will support government intervention to break the strike, just as it did in 2008, when it voted along with the Liberals and Conservatives to outlaw a less than two-day-old Toronto Transit Commission strike.

That CUPE is preparing to betray the Toronto workers' anti-concessions struggle, whether by bowing before a back-to-work law or capitulating before the city's demands is underscored by its attitude toward the rank and file. The union leadership is keeping the membership entirely in the dark about the state of negotiations. Workers haven't even been informed about the full extent of the city's concession demands. Rather than meet the rank and file, CUPE Local 416, which represents the 8,000 outside workers, cancelled a June 23 membership meeting. Furthermore, picket lines are being policed by the union to ensure that workers do not speak to the press and public, thus instilling an attitude of docility among the strikers and preventing them from answering the establishment's anti-worker propaganda.

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 political straitjacket in which CUPE is seeking to constrain their struggle.



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