

Striking city workers hold rally in Windsor, Ontario

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Some 2,000 workers and supporters took part in a demonstration in Windsor, Ontario on Friday, in the ninth week of a strike by city workers.

Over 1,800 municipal employees are on strike, including waste disposal, maintenance, and city park workers. The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) arranged for workers throughout Ontario to participate in the rally.

D'Artagnan Collier, the Socialist Equality Party candidate for mayor in Detroit, attended the rally, and supporters distributed a statement calling for the unity of Canadian and American workers. Collier urged mass opposition to the attack on the jobs and living conditions of workers internationally, and called on strikers to attend a public meeting in Detroit on Tuesday.

Workers spoke to Collier and the *World Socialist Web Site*, expressing deep opposition to the demands from the city for concessions, including the elimination of retiree benefits for new-hires.

Last week, Windsor Mayor Eddie Francis announced that the city would resume negotiations this Tuesday. CUPE officials have been calling for the resumption of discussions, which broke off in mid-May.

Like its American counterpart, the Canadian ruling class is using the economic crisis as an opportunity to attack workers throughout the country, eliminating benefits, destroying hundreds of thousands of jobs, and reducing wages. Windsor city workers have been the target of a smear campaign from the government and the *Windsor Star* newspaper, which has sought to whip up opposition to the strikers.

For its part, CUPE leaders are desperately seeking some accommodation with the city to end the strike. The central demand raised by officials at the rally was

for the city to agree to binding arbitration if negotiations fail. Mayor Francis is resisting arbitration on the grounds that arbitrators tend to favor workers and that a settlement will end up costing the city more.

In fact, CUPE officials have already agreed to concessions. In its last offer, CUPE proposed a \$2,000 payment to members in the first year of a four-year contract, followed by wage increases of between 2.5 percent and 3 percent for the next three years. With inflation, this will mean a cut in real wages over the course of the contract. The union has also agreed that workers will cover half the cost of future retiree benefits.

In a press release last month, Jim Wood, president of CUPE Local 82, said, "We agreed that post-retirement benefits for new employees could end at age 65, and we offered to cost share an optional benefits plan for them. The City refused."

The city is proposing draconian cuts, including a two-year wage freeze with a \$1,250 payment, followed by wage increases of only 1.25 and 1.5 percent over two years. The city also wants to eliminate entirely retiree benefits for new-hires, creating a two-tier benefit structure.

Any proposal reached through binding arbitration would be somewhere between the latest offers of the two sides—that is, it would involve significant concessions on wages and benefits.

The attack on Windsor city workers is part of a broad attack on workers throughout the province. The Liberal-led provincial government in Ontario and the Conservative federal government of Steven Harper recently worked closely with the Obama administration in the US and the Canadian Auto Workers union to impose massive concessions and job cuts on auto workers.

As a consequence of the destruction of auto and other manufacturing jobs, Windsor now has the one of the highest official unemployment rates in the country, at 13.8 percent. The city came in at the very bottom of a recent survey of company hiring intentions in Canada.

Concessions forced on city workers in Windsor will be used as a precedent throughout the country. Municipal workers in Toronto are also facing huge concession demands and a strike deadline of June 21.

Workers at the rally spoke to the WSWS about both the immediate issues in the strike and the broader impact of the economic crisis.

Carol, a seasonal part-time city worker for six years, said, "It's not fun, let me tell you. It's getting bad all over. It's very hard on families. You are limited in what you can do. I have a daughter who is in the second year of college, but I can't help with her education.

"We want the benefits to remain as they are and protect new-hires. A lot of city workers have 30 years and will be retiring soon."

Another worker with 10 years as a city worker complained, "They have no consideration for how long we have worked. They have no loyalty to us at all."

Joanne, who came to the rally from the Ontario city of Mississauga, where she is a city worker, said, "If [Francis] is successful in Windsor, it will be other cities next. We have to give our support and take a stand."

Speaking on the economic situation, Joanne added, "Jobs are being cut, people are losing their homes, unemployment is going up, parents can't afford school fees anymore after a 66 percent increase. We didn't create the problem, but we are the ones at the bottom of the ladder and are being made to pay.

"We decided that we are going to fight back. It is necessary to send a message to the mayor that we won't accept this any more," Joanne said.

Tam, a city worker for six years, said, "We don't want to give [retirement benefits] up because we fought for this in the past. If we give it up now, it will have all been useless. It is too late in the game to give it up. We have the opportunity now to fight."

The author also recommends:

D'Artagnan Collier visits striking city workers in Windsor, Ontario
[26 May 2009]



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