

Municipal workers resist concession demands in Windsor, Ontario

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25 June 2009

Eighteen hundred municipal employees in the southwestern Ontario city of Windsor, across the river from Detroit, have entered their 11th week on strike against city demands for the elimination of retirement benefits for new hires and other givebacks.

Around 400 outside workers, including sanitation, roadwork and city park workers walked out April 15, and were joined several days later by 1,400 inside workers, including day care, social services and clerical workers. Windsor, known as Canada's "Motor City," has been hard hit by the layoff of auto workers at Chrysler and supplier plants, and at 13.8 percent, the city has the highest jobless rate in the country.

Just like the strike by 24,000 city workers in Toronto, which began Monday, the walkout in Windsor has been provoked by the efforts of Canadian governments at various levels to make the working class pay for the economic crisis through the gutting of social services and workers' living standards.

Windsor Mayor Eddie Francis is seeking a cap on post-retirement benefits for newly hired workers once they reach the age of 65, essentially eliminating pensions and retiree healthcare benefits for the next generation of workers. Lifelong retiree benefits have been in place for more than half a century.

Francis is taking his lead from the Conservative minority government in Ottawa and the provincial Liberal government, which used the threat of bankruptcy to blackmail GM and Chrysler workers into making massive concessions.

"Post-retirement benefits have grown to become a \$290-million liability across the corporation," Francis told CTV News Channel on Monday from Windsor. "If we don't control these legacy costs then we are going to pay for it down the road, like we did with Chrysler

and GM."

Francis enjoys the backing of big business and news media, which has sought to whip up public opinion against the strikers by claiming that they are selfish and oblivious to the impact of the strike on the public.

"Entering into the 11th week of a strike, you would expect garbage to be piled up and residents to be calling city hall demanding city hall to capitulate. That hasn't taken place," Francis told CTV News. "Residents are telling us to stand strong and do what we need to do to protect their interests. This community is acutely aware of the consequence of not dealing with legacy costs ahead of time and letting them grow to a point of being uncontrollable," said Francis.

In fact, there is widespread sympathy in Windsor, a solidly working class community with a long history of militant struggles, for the principled stand taken by the strikers. The struggle, however, is in danger of defeat, not because of any lack of determination by the workers, but because of the isolation imposed on the strike by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and other unions, including the CAW. They have done nothing to appeal to the working class in the city, let alone mobilize auto workers and other sections of the population in common struggle against the attack on jobs, living standards and social services.

Meanwhile, the CUPE leadership is conducting negotiations behind the backs of the members and has already agreed to major concessions, including abandoning post-retirement benefits for new hires.

Last Thursday, negotiations fell apart when CUPE walked out complaining that its proposals had been leaked to the media. Union officials then filed a bad faith bargaining complaint with Ontario's Labour Relations Board. An agreement with the union, the mayor said, had been "inches" away.

According to reports, CUPE abandoned the strikers' central demand and accepted the elimination of post-retirement benefits for new hires. In exchange, it sought to bribe workers with a C\$2,000 lump sum payment in the first year, followed by small wage increases, at or below the rate of inflation, over the next three years.

Rank-and-file workers, however, rejected this betrayal. CUPE Local 82 President Jim Wood, representing outside workers, told the *Windsor Star* that the demand to protect retirement benefits "was back on the table and that CUPE members at a union information meeting at the Caboto Club on Friday were adamant that the union should fight to keep those benefits." Wood added, "I know it wasn't the CUPE side that leaked the details."

Luke Tittley, a CUPE representative, told CTV.ca that a city council member had likely leaked the union's full proposal to the media. "We want fair bargaining and we have proposed many cost cutting solutions related to staffing, hours of work, scheduling and equipment, and they've all been rejected," Tittley told the news web site.

Citing a "poisonous" bargaining atmosphere, local CUPE officials said they would only return to the bargaining table if a new mediator were put in charge of reaching a settlement. The union had previously attempted to settle the dispute through binding arbitration—an action that would impose a concessions contract on workers without a vote—and now is claiming that a "labour-friendly" mediator will side with workers, a claim that has been disproved in countless strikes.

Picketing strikers at the Central Avenue Transfer Station spoke with the WSWs. Mark said, "All they want to do is eliminate the middle class and have nothing but the rich and the poor. They felt we were getting too strong and want us to be weak.

"The top management is bringing home bonuses, and there is nothing left for us. It's hitting everyone, including the Chrysler workers. Windsor used to be the motor capital, now it is the unemployment capital of Canada."

Todd added, "Here on the picket line, we refer to post-retirement benefits as 'end of life care.' They're trying to carry out the same policies in Canada as they are in the States: cut out pensions and retiree healthcare benefits because they think there too many of us living

too long after retirement. They claim they can't make retirement benefits available for everyone.

"They've cut back on doctors and that is causing waiting times to increase. There is a shortage of family doctors and they are always adding 'service costs' and other fees not covered by OHIP [Ontario Health Insurance Plan]. You can spend eight hours waiting in the emergency room and I've heard stories of ambulances being backed up because of the shortage of beds. It looks like that is the kind of healthcare 'reform' that Obama is aiming at in the US too.

"All of the parties are against us. When the New Democratic Party ran Ontario under Bob Rae, he imposed something called the 'Social Contract.' Wages were frozen, and we were forced to work 15 days without pay—we called them 'Rae Days.' I knew then that a contract wasn't worth the paper it was written on.

"Now, a lot of municipalities are waiting on negotiating their contracts to see what the outcome here in Windsor is going to be. This is a test case for workers around the country."

Another striker said, "The way I see it, they are going after our post-retirement benefits in Windsor. In Toronto, they're going after sick days and seniority. The Association of Municipalities of Ontario has targets. They are picking off this issue in one city and that in another. That's why we all need to stand together."



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