

Canada: CUPE forces Windsor strikers to vote on concessionary offer

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The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) has bowed before the City of Windsor's demand that it submit the city's latest concessionary contract proposals to municipal workers for a ratification vote.

Members respectively of CUPE Locals 543 and 82, Windsor's 1,800 inside and outside workers have been on strike since mid-April. The central issue in the dispute is the city's attempt to impose a two-tier benefit structure. The city long refused to even table a wage offer, vowing that it would do so only when the union agreed that new hires would no longer be entitled to post-retirement medical benefits.

While claiming that they do not endorse the city's contract proposals, local CUPE leaders are refusing to campaign for their rejection—a flagrant abdication of leadership that places the workers' militant anti-concessions struggle in grave danger.

CUPE Local 543 President Jean Fox said she was “very, very disappointed” with the city's offer, but nonetheless would not try to “sway” votes. As if to emphasize the union's retreat, she added that “it's hard to say what the membership is going to do.”

Details of the city's offer, which is to be voted on at membership meetings today, have not been released. But Mayor Eddie Francis, who has been casting himself as the champion of beleaguered Windsor taxpayers, boasted that it “reflects our ability to pay” and contains the city's demand for a two-tier benefit structure.

As is the case in Toronto, where 24,000 city workers have been on strike since June 22, the political establishment and corporate media have sought to whip up public animosity against the Windsor city strikers, charging that they are selfish for balking at concessions and are indifferent to the hardships caused by the

economic slump.

“If CUPE turns down a deal that looks like nirvana in the city with the highest unemployment in Canada,” declared *Windsor Star* columnist Chris Vander Doelen just days before the city forced the municipal workers out on strike with its concession demands, “they might find the public backlash against them shocking.”

The ruling class campaign to pit “taxpayers” against public sector workers has a double aim. It is part of a general push to drive down the wages, benefits and working conditions of all working people and is intended, by breaking the resistance of public sector workers, to lay the groundwork for a fresh assault on public and social services.

Already the press is full of editorials and commentary about the long-term “unsustainability” of federal, provincial, and municipal services due to the economic crisis and the aging of the population.

While big business has voiced its unanimous anger and fear at the Windsor and Toronto municipal anti-concession strikes, which they rightly views as a challenge to their attempt to make the working class pay for the capitalist crisis, the CUPE leadership has worked to isolate the strikes and confine them within the most narrow collective bargaining framework.

The strike in Windsor, Canada's largest auto manufacturing centre, erupted at the very point where the federal Conservative and Ontario Liberal governments had joined forces with the auto bosses to impose unprecedented wage and benefit cuts on Chrysler and General Motors workers. Yet CUPE did not propose, let alone left a finger to actually organize, a joint campaign of independent industrial and political working class action against all concessions, lay-offs and budget cuts.

Similarly, other than a handful of ritualistic gestures,

absolutely nothing has been done to unite the Windsor strike with that of the Toronto city workers (members of CUPE locals 79 and 416).

It is an open secret that the CUPE leadership would welcome provincial back-to-work legislation, calculating that a government imposed arbitrator would follow recent precedent and not impose significant concessions.

Fearing such an outcome, big business has thus far been urging the Liberal government not to outlaw the municipal strikes in Windsor and Toronto. They are determined to demonstrably impose concessions on the municipal workers and have been encouraged in this by CUPE's failure to challenge their hypocritical campaign to portray the city workers as "privileged."

This does not mean that the provincial government has not intervened to support the city's concession drive. In May the Environment Ministry ordered the removal of an unauthorized garbage dump, thereby giving a boost to the city's campaign to encourage the use of private removal services. Even more importantly, Premier McGuinty himself spearheaded the push for concessions with his repeated pronouncements that if auto workers did not accept unprecedented wage and benefit cuts, his government was ready to push GM and Chrysler into bankruptcy and would renege on a three-decades-old Ontario government guarantee of GM and Chrysler retirees' pensions

Windsor city workers should reject the city's concessions demands and break out of the straitjacket in which the union leadership and their allies in the NDP have confined their struggle. Their strike could and would win mass support if it was consciously organized as the spearhead of a struggle of the entire working class against concessions, layoffs and public and social service cuts.

Indeed, a major factor in the virulent media campaign against the strikers is the fear within the ruling elite that the city workers' militant example will galvanize working class resistance to their drive to making the working class pay for the capitalist crisis.



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