

Toronto city workers no-concession struggle in danger

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The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) has moved to shut down a five week “no concessions” strike by 24,000 City of Toronto inside and outside municipal workers.

In announcing a tentative settlement with the city Monday, CUPE Local 416 President Mark Ferguson, who represents 6,000 outside workers, claimed that the union had forced the city to withdraw all 118 pages of its concession demands. “The last concession came off the table just under an hour ago,” said Ferguson shortly after daybreak Monday. Several hours later Ann Dembinski, the president of Local 79, the bargaining agent for the inside workers, termed the settlement her local’s bargaining committee had negotiated with the city a “great deal.”

No credence should be given to the union’s cries of victory. Details of the two contracts will only be released after ratification votes today. But the press is widely reporting that the CUPE leadership has accepted wage increases totalling 6 percent over three years. This is less than both the anticipated inflation rate and the increases granted other Toronto and Ontario public employees in recent contracts.

The union has also agreed to the city’s most important concession demand—the phasing out of a scheme that allowed workers to “bank” unused sick days and cash them out on retirement. This scheme, which was meant to spur attendance and was used by workers to fashion a safety net against the loss of income due to injury or illness, is to be replaced with a short-term disability plan.

If the press reports are accurate, high-seniority workers will be able to keep their accumulated sick days, but not to accrue any more, and, as under the previous contract, will be able to cash them in on

retirement at 50 percent of their value to a maximum of six months’ wages.

Other workers will be encouraged to accept a buyout of their accumulated sick days at far less than the retirement rate of 50 percent. Under the city’s previous offer, which is said to have formed the basis for the buyout plan in the proposed agreement, those with less than ten years seniority are especially disfavoured. Workers will only learn of the extent of their losses when they have a chance to peruse the contract’s fine print.

Mayor David Miller rejected Ferguson’s interpretation of the tentative contract, insisting that it represents important cost savings for the city at the workers’ expense. Said Miller, “I have a quite different view of so-called concessions than Mr. Ferguson. I think when people see [the proposed contract] they will agree, it is consistent with 2009 public-sector settlements and it met the city’s bargaining goals, not just to be fair to our workers, but to run the city affordably and to run it effectively and efficiently. Those were our goals and we achieved them.”

Such a surrender is entirely consistent with the manner in which CUPE has mounted—or rather strangled—the Toronto strike and a 101-day strike in Windsor, Ontario. The latter ended last Friday, with the union agreeing to the city’s demand for a two-tier retirement benefit structure, the principal issue at stake in the strike, and a meagre 6.3 percent wage increase spread over four years.

In the face of a venomous campaign on the part of big business and the corporate media to slur the strikers as “selfish” for balking at concessions, CUPE has said little and done less. It has taken no action to broaden the city worker strikes by making them the spearhead of a working-class counteroffensive against the attempt

of big business and their political hirelings in the federal Conservative and Ontario Liberal governments to make working people bear the burden for the capitalist crisis through layoffs and plant closures, concessions, and cuts to public and social services.

On the contrary, it has done everything to demobilize the strikers. In Toronto, over the course of more than five weeks of strike, no meetings have been held and workers have been kept utterly in the dark about the negotiations.

As for the NDP, the party supported by the unions, it has maintained a studied silence on the struggles of the Windsor and Toronto city workers, effectively supporting the big business campaign to isolate and wear down the strikers.

The NDP leadership and for that matter the entire union officialdom are anxious to resume cozy relations with Mayor Miller, who was an NDP member until 2007, on the grounds that his reelection next year is the only means of preventing a champion of privatization and service cuts from seizing the mayor's chair.

In contradistinction to many previous public sector strikes, including the 2002 Toronto city workers' strike and a walkout by Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) workers last year, the corporate media opposed provincial back-to-work legislation, for fear that an arbitrated settlement would not be sufficiently anti-worker. The media has been baying for a public goring of the city workers so as to intensify the push for contract concessions and weaken worker resistance to impending cuts to city services and public services as a whole.

With the full details of the city worker contracts still to be released, the corporate media is reserving judgment on the settlement.

The neoconservative *National Post* mocked Ferguson's claim that the union had managed to "fight back all of the concessions," but declared the strike proves "Torontonians should agitate for private (garbage) pick up."

The *Globe and Mail's* Marcus Gee, one of the leading anti-strike scribes (who previously propagandized for the Iraq War, trumpeting the Bush administration's lies about weapons of mass destruction) complained that Miller did not pry enough concessions from the city workers: "He staked his reputation on winning this strike but came away with half a win at best."

Toronto Star Meanwhile liberal den that all of the city's ambulance services, not just the current 75 percent, be declared "essential." Six thousand Toronto city workers have been legally barred from participating in the strike on the grounds they provide essential services.

The right wing on the Toronto city council, which has been seeking to whip up a "taxpayer's revolt," has threatened to vote against the contact settlement if the takeaways are not big enough.

While there is a large element of political posturing in this, there is no question that much of the Toronto establishment, encouraged by CUPE's emasculation of the strike, now intends to use the crisis in the city's finances, caused by the recession and the off-loading of services onto the municipalities carried out by the ultra-right wing Harris Conservative government (1995-2002), to press for service cuts and privatization.

Toronto city workers should reject the concessions contract thrust upon them by the union leadership, break out of collective bargaining straitjacket in which CUPE has confined their struggle, and seek to mobilize the entire working class in an industrial and political offensive in defence of all jobs, working conditions, and public and social services.

But irrespective of the outcome of tomorrow's ratification vote, workers must recognize the urgency of adopting an entirely new strategy—a strategy that begins with a rejection of the subordination of economic life and social need to private profit.



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