

More establishment lies against striking Toronto City workers

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Toronto's political and corporate establishment are ratcheting up pressure on 24,000 municipal workers—now in their tenth day of strike action—to accept across-the-board concessions on wages, benefits, seniority rights, and working conditions.

Battening off a rabid campaign in the local and national media to characterize the strikers, members of Canadian Union of Public Employee locals 79 and 416, as “greedy” and “selfish,” representatives of the entire mainstream political spectrum have blocked together to attack the strikers.

Tim Hudak, the newly minted leader of Ontario's Conservative Party, wasted no time after his convention victory this past weekend to propagate the cynical lies being churned out by the Toronto newspapers and talk-radio stations. Hudak, an extreme right winger hoisted to his new position by campaigning as the heir to former Conservative Premier Mike Harris, stated, “You know, in today's environment in the depths of recession and a lot of middle-class families struggling to make ends meet, the notion of some of the unions of going out on strike with high demands won't sit very well with taxpayers...People in the private sector are very worried if they'll have a job next month, people who have saved have seen their RRSPs (Registered Retirement Savings Plans) shrink and will look strange at some of the demands we're seeing from public sector unions.”

Hudak's remarks were reported entirely uncritically by the reporters and pundits who are closely following the renewed eruption of class conflict in Toronto and across Ontario. What “high demands” is Hudak talking about? Wherever one cares to look the trade unions are in wholesale retreat. And the representatives of big business are clearly anxious to press home the advantage. The drive to gut contracts in the auto industry, forestry and throughout the private sector is now spilling over into the public sector as the ruling elite, invokes soaring budget deficits, to argue for a new round of cuts to public and social services and to the wages and

working conditions of the workers who administer them.

Why were Hudak's remarks left unchallenged? After all, it is a matter of public record that the City of Toronto has placed over one hundred pages of concessionary demands on the bargaining table. They refused to budge on any of them in six months of negotiations prior to the mid-June strike. Among the employer's demands is the “right” to lay off high seniority workers first so that more junior, lower paid and even part-time workers can be kept in place.

The city's demand for severe cuts to a standard public service sick-pay policy (that allows worker to bank unused sick days) is entirely linked to the fact that demographics within some sections of the workforce tilt heavily toward workers who have given many years of their working lives to city employment.

The union, for its part, refrained from making almost any proposals for improvements in its contracts with the city, strategizing that the best that could be done was a rearguard defense of the status quo in contract language, silence on the larger issues of the looming cuts to city social services, and a proposal for a wage settlement barely in line with deals reached by city hall with other unions and employer associations over the past year.

Yet Hudak feels entirely enabled by the climate created by the press to openly declare that the union is making “high demands” and suggest that the workers, in the vernacular of the most strident shells for big business, should consider themselves lucky to even have a job!

Such outrageous statements are not reserved to avowed right wingers. The liberal *Toronto Star* has urged Toronto's city councilors to repeal the 2.4 percent wage increase they recently rewarded themselves (raising their annual pay to just under \$100,000), so as to lend “legitimacy” to their drive to impose a wage freeze and concessions on the strikers. And senior *Star* columnist Richard Gwyn, in a piece titled “Striking workers' sick day perks touch a nerve,” has invoked the need for a Thatcher-style anti-working class offensive to deal with “out of control” public sector workers.

Representatives of so-called worker or labor “friendly” forces are also piling on the workers, making cynical and dishonest claims akin to those of the new Tory leader. On Monday, Toronto Mayor David Miller, a former, if recently lapsed, member of the New Democratic Party who has received strong support from the city’s labour bureaucracy over the years called a press conference to attack CUPE Local 79 (representing striking inside workers) for the slow pace of negotiations.

Said Miller, “Both I and our city negotiators are frustrated that the Local 79 negotiating team has not been responding quickly to reach a settlement. Sadly, the delays in responding to city proposals is slowing the bargaining process, and delaying a quick end to this strike. If you’re not at the table negotiating, we’re not going to be able to resolve this matter.”

In his statement, Miller neglected to inform the public that the city’s negotiating team, which he oversees, has yet to respond to the counter-proposals tabled by the union in the months prior to the strike. Nor has it even entertained the proposition that the city’s laundry list of concession demands be rethought. As far as a quick end to the strike goes, the designation of 19 city parks as temporary “garbage dumps” and the preparation of a second list of parks to be used in the coming weeks once the current “dumps” are filled, surely tips the hand of Miller’s true bargaining strategy.

Miller is heeding the demands of the corporate media, which has proclaimed his ability to tough out a long strike and break the worker resistance to concessions as a critical test of whether he merits re-election next year.

Such has been the virulence of the attacks on city workers’ so-called “outrageous demands” that Murray Dobbin, a “senior contributing editor” for Rabble, the unofficial internet organ of the trade union bureaucracy and New Democratic Party, felt compelled to weigh in alongside those who are using the big business “talking point” to drive a wedge between the working people of Toronto and the strikers.

Sounding like a member of Miller’s negotiating team, he opined, “In the case of the sick leave issue it comes down to fairness—perhaps the strongest core Canadian value there is. My take is that most people look at sick leave as a right. Accumulating sick leave and using it when actually sick is totally acceptable. But being able to cash it in on retirement will be seen by many as crossing the line, violating the understanding between community and those who serve it. Right or wrong, when unions sign collective agreements it would be wise for them to spend a bit of time imagining how each contract provision might be used against them the next time they strike—and hope for their well-deserved public

support”.

According to Dobbin, workers should not only be happy to surrender long held provisions in their current contract, but should have an eye to self-censoring any future advances for fear of upsetting the editors of the *National Post*, the *Globe and Mail* and the *Toronto Sun* and *Star*.

The virulence of the establishment’s campaign against the striking city workers is rooted in its anger and fear: Anger that the workers have had the temerity to challenge big business’s drive to make the working class pay for the capitalist crisis and fear that their defiance could serve as an example for other workers.

But rather than make the strike the spearhead of working class counter offensive—a movement against all layoffs and concessions and in defence of public and social services—the CUPE leadership is doing everything in its power to isolate the city workers’ struggle and demobilize the strikers.

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

In other words they are depending on the good graces of the rightwing Liberal government of Dalton McGuinty to somewhat soften the concession blow.

This is a ruinous strategy. The Liberals—egged on the by same media voices that are shedding crocodile tears over the plight of the jobless and pensioners—joined hands with the federal Conservative government this spring to extort unprecedented concessions from GM and Chrysler workers by threatening to push the automakers into bankruptcy and liquidation.

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