

CUPE leadership isolating Toronto city workers' strike

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As the bitter Toronto municipal strike by 24,000 members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) enters its sixth week, there is a growing disquiet amongst the membership that the trade union leadership is preparing to wind up the dispute and accept wholesale concessions affecting virtually every aspect of their labour contract (see accompanying interviews).

Sixty-two hundred outside workers, members of CUPE Local 416, and 18,000 inside workers, represented by CUPE Local 79, walked off the job June 22 to oppose the city's attempt to cut their real wages, increase their workload, weaken seniority rights, eliminate a program that allows them to bank unused sick days, and impose fees on some other benefits. The strike has caused a halt to garbage collection in Canada's largest city, forced the closure of 57 city-run daycare centers, shut down municipal swimming pools and recreational activities, and affected a broad array of other municipal services.

The Toronto strikers' principled stand against concessions has infuriated the city government and the entire Canadian media and political establishment. The media moguls and local business leaders have supported the city's attack, calculating that a very public goring of the city workers will facilitate their drive to impose concessions on all public sector workers and to slash the public and social services that they administer.

For weeks, the Toronto newspapers and airwaves have been saturated with the most vitriolic attacks on "greedy" and "selfish" workers who are portrayed as bloody-mindedly "holding the city to ransom." The fact that the average wage of the strikers is slightly less than \$40,000 per year does not merit so much as a mention.

No one reports on the years of wage freeze the membership endured in the previous decade. And most surely, no one in the Canadian media challenges the fantastic sums paid out to corporate executives and the various financial parasites. That is business as usual.

Yet in the teeth of these vicious attacks, Ann Dembinski, president of Local 79, Mark Ferguson, president of Local 416, and Sid Ryan, leader of the Ontario wing of CUPE have refused to mobilize their own membership, let alone the masses of working people in the Greater Toronto Area. The progress of negotiations, such as they are, remains shrouded in secrecy. Inquiries from the rank-and-file go unanswered. Picket lines slowly diminish. Only when Toronto Mayor David Miller went to the press with the city's latest offer were the union leaders forced even to update their own Web sites.

To date, not one mass rally has been held by the leadership—a photo-op for union leaders in front of City Hall on the first day of the strike was not advertised amongst the general membership. No attempt was made to link up the just recently betrayed 14 week CUPE municipal workers' strike in Windsor with the Toronto dispute. Rather than make the strike the spearhead of a working class counter offensive—a movement against all layoffs and concessions and in defense of public and social services—the CUPE leadership is doing everything in its power to isolate the city workers' struggle, demobilise the strikers and confine the dispute behind the most narrow collective bargaining parameters. Indeed, Dembinski has gone so far as to intimate to the press that the union local has already accepted concessions on the pivotal sick pay issue and is now bargaining largely on the question of a meager wage raise.

Local 416 President Mark Ferguson made CUPE's

ruinous strategy abundantly clear in a recent interview with the *Toronto Star*. The strike is not about gaining public sympathy, he told the big business newspaper, let alone about his own membership. “We all want to be liked, but I don’t see the strike as a popularity contest...” said Ferguson. “As long as I can be judged by those who know and love me that I’m doing the right thing, it doesn’t matter to me what the average person thinks.”

It is an open secret that CUPE, whatever it says publicly, is not averse to the Liberal provincial government intervening 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. It is this dim hope that lies behind Ferguson’s melodramatic announcement on Friday that should negotiations not result in a settlement by Sunday at midnight, the union will walk away from the bargaining table.

In other words, CUPE is depending on the good graces of the right-wing Liberal government of Dalton McGuinty to somewhat soften the concession blow. This is a ruinous strategy. The big business Liberal party, no less than the union-supported Mayor of Toronto, has made it abundantly clear that it has no intention of turning the fate of the strike over to an arbitrator who feels obligated by precedent to follow more generous patterns recently negotiated by the police and fire services and in the municipal housing sector.

The corporate media’s campaign against the Toronto city workers attests to the fact that in opposing the city’s concession demands, the strikers are challenging the entire economic and political establishment. Such a struggle can be won only in so far as city workers recognize this and respond by making their strike the spearhead of an industrial and political offensive of the entire working class against the big business agenda of dismantling public and social services, slashing jobs, and gutting wages and working conditions. Such a campaign—in opposition to the CUPE leadership’s attempt to restrict and isolate the strike—would win widespread support.

This means a political struggle against all the pro-capitalist parties, Liberals, Conservatives and NDP, and the building of a new socialist, internationalist party of the working class, fighting for a workers government

that would redistribute the wealth and reorganize the economy on the basis of its democratic control by the population.



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