

Canada: Windsor municipal workers reject new concessions contract

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Municipal workers in Windsor, Ontario, on strike since mid-April, overwhelmingly rejected the city's "final offer" in voting July 16. The 1,800 workers, members of Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Locals 82 and 543, include road and garbage collection workers, as well as childcare workers and health care providers. A central issue has been the city's demand that post-retirement medical benefits be ended for all new hires.

The decisive rejection is a blow to the vicious campaign pursued by the Windsor and Toronto media against the strikers, portraying them as "selfish" individuals who are "holding the public hostage" by their walkout.

CUPE Local 543 President Jean Fox told the media, "It was an incredible vote, better than I could ever have hoped for. It was a clear resounding no." She indicated that 85 percent of the 867 members of her local, who voted, out of 1,400 had rejected the city's offer.

Jim Wood, president of Local 82, told reporters outside the Caboto Club in Windsor, "Our membership spoke very, very strongly against not having some type of post-retirement benefit there." He went on, "We brought back what city council has decided our membership should see. We showed it to them and they told us once again, post-retirement benefits are the issue." Wood did not indicate the exact vote totals in his local.

In response to the vote, Windsor Mayor Eddie Francis has suggested that the city may avail itself of a reactionary Ontario labor law provision allowing an employer to force its workforce to vote on its "final offer" in a vote conducted by the Ontario Labour Relations Board.

The rejected deal included a signing bonus of \$1,300 for full-time employees and \$650 for part-time workers, and miserable wage increases over the next four years. It did not include the post-retirement benefits.

The Windsor strikers' principled stand has infuriated

the city government and the entire Canadian media and political establishment. It is rightly seen as a challenge to the effort to make the working population pay the cost of the global economic crisis. 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.

The *Windsor Star's* Chris Vander Doelen, one of the leading anti-strike witch-hunters, claims that "This is a community that recognizes that if unsustainable practices can destroy GM and Chrysler, they can bring down a city, too" as though autoworkers were responsible for the bankruptcy of the car companies.

Marcus Gee, of the *Globe and Mail*, an enthusiast of the Iraq war, specializes in self-righteous anger against the 24,000 striking city workers in Toronto, who walked out June 22, and their "generous entitlements."

Gee wrote on Thursday: "With the [Toronto] mayor's offer of settlement on the table, City of Toronto unions are weighing whether to end their fruitless strike or hold out for something better. A little look down the 401 to Windsor might help focus their minds.

"Windsor's municipal unions have been out on the street since April, when the trees were still bare even in Canada's southernmost city. Three months later, with summer half gone, the public is against them, the city is ticking along nicely without them and city council is holding firm on its demand for concessions on their costly benefits."

Several months of this type of anti-strike media propaganda, combined with the bullying and ultimatums of Mayor Francis, have infuriated many strikers. Adding insult to injury, nonunion city managers showed up Thursday outside the venue where workers were meeting, and handed out a return-to-work protocol. The document informed strikers, should they accept the city's offer, they would return to work Monday.

The effort at intimidation backfired badly. Workers were generally outraged at the city's provocation, an obvious attempt to preempt their own decision-making process, and, in the words of one union official, a "near-riot" erupted. Strikers tossed copies of the document in the air, and stuffed garbage cans with them. Copies of the contract offer suffered the same fate.

Media representatives were also the target of the municipal workers' displeasure outside the vote Thursday. Rank-and-file workers refused to speak to the reporters swarming around. In fact, in one instance, when the WSWS was interviewing strikers, other reporters attempted to horn in on the conversation and were told to clear off.

The municipal workers' strikes in Windsor and Toronto are important battles, but they remain isolated and in danger of defeat because of the policies and outlook of CUPE and the rest of the Ontario and Canadian trade union hierarchy. These pro-capitalist officials accept in principle that workers should make sacrifices in the "national interests," they merely quibble over how deep the cuts should go and at what rate.

The last thing CUPE officials want to see is an offensive led by Toronto and Windsor city workers against concessions, layoffs and budget cuts. Windsor, the center of the Canadian automobile industry across the river from Detroit, has seen thousands of manufacturing jobs destroyed in the past decade, without a finger being lifted by the Canadian Auto Workers, every bit as class collaborationist as the United Auto Workers in the US.

According to the *Windsor Star*, in two articles published Friday, CUPE officials are prepared to give in on the critical issue in the dispute. The newspaper asserts that Local 543 president Fox "confirmed outside City Hall that the union's offer to the city had taken post-retirement benefits for new hires off the table. 'The issues now are mostly around wages and language,' she said." Fox also called "for the strike to be settled via arbitration because the process has been 'severely flawed and tainted'" ("Councillors criticize mayor for sending managers to CUPE vote").

Another *Star* article Friday claimed, "Both the employer's proposal this week and the union's 'final offer' last Friday...would have seen an end to post-retirement benefits for new hires, which the city had described as its core issue" ("'Extremely angry' strikers reject city's offer").

If this is true, it would amount to surrender by the CUPE leadership. It would suggest that Thursday's vote

was largely a maneuver by union officials, to save face before the membership. This only underscores the risk facing Windsor—and Toronto—city workers of an enormous betrayal.

The WSWS spoke to a number of Windsor city workers on Thursday outside their meeting place.

Striker Chris Boucher told us: "This strike is really all about destroying the rights and living standards of the workingman.

"Originally I was not for going out on strike. However, as it developed, I saw that what they really want to do is to break the union.

"He [Mayor Francis] runs the city like a dictatorship. We see this worldwide. The worker is really being hit hard. He has become the scapegoat and is being made responsible for the problem and the solution. I don't like it, and I don't agree with it.

"The city workers' strike in Toronto is different on the surface, but it is about the same basic issues.

"The city of Windsor is hoping to keep us out as long as possible. They want us to crawl back to work for crumbs."

Another striker pointed to the assembled media and said, "Those guys over there are the real problem. They distort everything we say, and side with those who want to take away our rights."

In defense of new hires getting post-retirement benefits, one striker told us, "Look, if someone hit your brother and knocked him down, would you take their invitation to forget everything and work together? We believe we have to stand together for all the workers."

Another worker acknowledged that there was a lot of support for the strike in Windsor, but that it was not being mobilized. "We know a lot of people are with us. I don't understand why the leadership has not called a mass demonstration. The autoworkers are in the same situation we are in. They face cuts too. We should all be standing together."



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