Canada: Windsor city workers strike betrayed

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The 1,800 municipal workers in Windsor, Ontario, who fought with great determination for 101 days against the destruction of post-retirement benefits for the next generation of workers, were betrayed by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) union and the entire union apparatus in Ontario and Canada.

Obliged to exist on meager strike pay, facing the unrelenting hostility of the big business media, isolated from other workers and even other CUPE strikes, Windsor city workers were finally worn down and forced to accept a concessions contract. Strikers, members of CUPE locals 543 and 82, ratified the agreement Friday. The deal eliminated post-retirement benefits for all future employees.

The workers in Windsor were fighting for broad layers of the population across North America who refuse to pay for an economic crisis that is not of their making. Meanwhile, those responsible for the meltdown, the bankers and corporate executives, along with the media moguls, rake in vast fortunes, at the same time as they preach "sacrifice" to the population. Well-paid union officials in Canada, as in the US, also either accept the principle that workers should pay for the current disaster, or are incapable of developing a strategy to resist the attacks.

The Windsor agreement includes a 6.3 percent wage increase over four years, and a $2,000 lump-sum payment, not rolled into the base pay, for full-time employees. An increase in the amount of the one-time payment—which doesn't begin to make up for what workers lost while on strike—was one of the major differences between this deal and the one overwhelmingly voted down by strikers July 16. Union leaders pressured the city to enlarge the lump sum in order to take the "sting" out of being forced to give up the post-retirement benefits.

CUPE Local 543 President Jean Fox told the media, "I know that we did the best job we could do; it's a pretty good contract." In fact, it's a rotten contract, which will open the floodgates for more concessions, including wage-cutting and contracting out of work.

During the course of its more than three months, the Windsor strike revealed how sharply polarized Canadian society has become along class lines. The strikers, like their counterparts in Toronto, who remain on strike, were the target of venomous attacks by the media. The *Windsor Star* and its columnists frothed at the mouth against the "greedy" and "selfish" workers, whose "overly generous entitlements" were ruining the city.

The *Star* is owned by Canwest Global Communications Corp., one of Canada's largest international media conglomerates, whose revenue in 2007 was $2.87 billion.

There will be no let-up in the assault on the municipal workers. *Windsor Star* columnist Chris Vander Doelen, one of the leading witch-hunters, made that clear in a column July 25. He noted, "Windsor's property tax hawks" would only lament "that city council flubbed the best chance in a generation to get labour costs under control. We had CUPE on the ropes, they'll howl, and they still get a 6.3 per cent wage increase? And they get all their vacation plus a signing bonus of two grand for nothing? Outrageous! They have a point."

Vander Doelen continued: "There isn't a shadow of a doubt taxpayers won this strike, even if they didn't get the wage and job cuts so many of them think were deserved in CUPE's case."

By "taxpayers," the columnist means the upper-middle-class layers who were up in arms that workers would dare to resist the destruction of benefits they gained more than a half century ago. These layers made their hostility to the strike abundantly clear.

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CUPE and Windsor's labour council were incapable of combating the propaganda, through mobilizing the working population in the city, including the unemployed, because they begin from the same premise as the media: that workers should pay for the city's crisis, the result of the destruction of manufacturing in the area, particularly the auto industry.

The conditions existed to launch a full-scale political and social offensive against all concessions, job and budget cuts. But that would involve a confrontation with all the big business political parties, Conservative, Liberal and NDP, and the unions wanted no part of such a mobilization.

CUPE and CAW officials have for months wanted to drop the post-retirement benefits issue. They were held back from doing so by the determination of the workers. The unions have only been waiting for the right moment, when workers were sufficiently exhausted, to sell out the strike.

The *Star*'s Vander Doelen made this clear in a May 23 article, only five weeks into the strike. He revealed that the CAW, which dominates the local labour council, was applying pressure on CUPE to give up the benefits: "How critical is the CUPE cost issue to Windsor's municipal survival? A few days ago, I'm told, people from the upper reaches of the city's CAW leadership intervened in an attempt to convince their counterparts at CUPE's national headquarters that things really are different in 2009." This is the state of the so-called labor movement.

Outside the hall where Windsor workers met and voted last Friday, the mood was subdued. We distributed the SEP Canada statement, "Reject the concessions contract ," which called for a no vote and for the rank and file to take the strike out of the hands of CUPE officials. Hardly anyone had a good word to say for the agreement, or the union leaders. Workers universally agreed that they were not to blame for the current crisis, but they do not yet see a political and social alternative.

As a result, there was a certain resignation among the strikers. As one veteran worker, John, a Local 82 member with more than 20 years on the job, commented, "People are losing their homes, their cars, they can't pay bills. Marriages are breaking up. We've had enough. You can't fight forever. If they paid us $400 a week strike pay, we could keep going." (Strikers were receiving $40 a day for picketing.)

A group of recreation workers explained that they had no benefits or job security whatsoever. After 20 years, one woman told us, "I'm still on probation. I have no more seniority than he does," she said, pointing to a young man just out of high school. She ridiculed the notion that the workers' demands were unreasonable. "Please, tell me, how I'm 'greedy.'" She explained that until recently the city would simply fire all the recreation workers for two weeks each year, and then rehire them, to save money on benefits.

A group of social services workers, members of Local 543, was vocally critical of the CUPE leadership. "The union is in bed with management," one woman told us. What did she mean by that? "Just look at what's happened for 14 weeks, that should tell you," she replied.

Gustave Morin, a member of Local 543 and a local artist, told the WSWS before the meeting, "We haven't seen the contract, but I can tell you that if there is a trade-off for the city to drop all charges against workers in exchange for dropping our claims of bad faith negotiations from the city, I am voting no.

"I think it is wrong to have a two-tiered benefits system. It will look good to some people in the short-term, but it will weaken the union in the long-term. There will be a new fleet of workers no longer eligible for the same benefits as older retirees. At a certain point the new hires will comprise the bulk of the union. So, in 20 years the older workers will be the minority of the workforce. And since we did not speak up for them, they will sell us out.

"People right now are desperate. There is really no justice. People will vote for the contract because they have been out for so long. Most people are really traumatized and are planning to be back to work by Monday.

"One thing that upsets me about the post-retirement benefits issue is that it is not actually a contract issue. We shouldn't even be talking about this in the contract.

"Post-retirement benefits are guaranteed by a city bylaw, and are guaranteed for all workers. What the city is really doing is using this strike as a way to get rid of the benefits or substantially change them. And the only way to change the situation was to exert enormous pressure on the workforce like they did on us.

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