

Sears Canada workers speak

A WSWS reporting team
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The 500-strong workforce at the Sears Distribution Center in Vaughan, Ontario have been locked out by the company since April 1. Their nearly six-month long struggle has been isolated by the United Steelworkers union and the Ontario Federation of Labor. (See accompanying article). The workforce is comprised of workers hailing from dozens of countries from all corners of the globe who have worked for many years for low wages and poor benefits.

Many workers were anxious to describe their experiences inside the warehouse and on the picket line. As the reporting team spoke to the picketers over the course of an hour, hundreds of cars and trucks passing by on the busy thoroughfare honked their horns in support of the workers.

Hector Simms, a worker from the Caribbean, said, “They want to cut everything. Our benefits, money, sick days, vacations. They think that if they can stop us then everyone else in the company will think that there’s no use fighting and then everyone will suffer.”

J. Moses, an immigrant from the Middle East, agreed with Hector. “They want you to act like a slave. They don’t want you to have any rights. Like dictators. A letter from Sears came to my wife at home on Friday telling that I had to come and agree to work on Monday. The letter came at 2 o’clock and they wanted an answer by 6 o’clock. It’s so no one will have time to think and talk about it. They are trying to scare everyone.”

Hemedur, another worker from the Middle East, said, “I don’t think many of us are crossing the line. I think maybe about two hundred have found other jobs. But they still support us. You will see them coming out here on the weekends. This morning before you came, we had about a hundred people here.

“Everyone wanted to talk about this letter sent by the company. It’s crazy. You should have seen what they

were telling. They were offering like one penny in a raise for some people. And one and a half pennies for others, and a few were getting four or five pennies.

“Who do they think we are? I don’t think that they will get many to go and sign up with them. We are strong. Yes, many of us are hurting. It is very difficult, but we have no choice. If we don’t fight then we will have nothing.”

Abdul Ali, originally from Somalia, spoke to our reporters. He has been at Sears for 10 years. He said, “For many years it was no good here because they were cutting everything and they were not hiring full-time people; people were all part-timers. I worked eight years part-time and after the union came in I was full-time.

“Because I was working full time they never hired me. But this new negotiation, it’s not something really new—it’s the same way they had it before and it’s not something acceptable. It’s the Sears policy that they wrote—everything that Sears policy wants—amending it from time to time, changing whatever they want.

“We need a contract which honors both sides. But they’re hiring scabs. They’re arranging for other warehouses to do work and bringing in agency people and they’re working. They are scabs—these guys here are scare scabs for security. You see they’re watching us, they are taking pictures with their cameras—they are in the cars, they are here, they are on the line. They are always taping you, trying to intimidate you.

“We want to get a contract from Sears—nothing else. They are changing the language but we want a contract that is reasonable. The aim of Sears is to create conflict through their lawyers and in the court and they are trying to get some people to cross the line without reaching any agreement. I myself—I’m with my people. Six months we’re standing here, and that’s what we do—until the last.”

Fay, an immigrant from the Philippines who has

worked four years as a forklift driver, said, “I just came back because I had my maternity leave so I just started. My maternity leave was finished in August and it started last August. The offer in there is like—some people get a little more, some people get like five cents, it depends on the hours—if you’re full-time or part-time—but me, I’m part-time. People are just waiting for the result of the negotiating.”

Maria, who is originally from El Salvador, has been in Canada for 18 years and has worked at Sears for 12 years. She told our reporter, “I worked as a materials handler driving forklift, but you have to learn everything in there so I have a lot of experience in different places. But nothing is secure. Sometimes I worked maybe 25 hours but sometimes far less, it depends. Like at 11 o’clock they say, ‘OK, go home.’ If you were lucky you would make more hours, right? Every workplace I think is the same practically.

“And then we get this letter. This is just a trick thing—I think they are just trying to see how the group is, if they are united, strong, whatever. They know that winter is coming. They know that this is the season with Christmas when they are busy. What happens is that when it’s a busy time they hire more part-time people. It’s cheaper for them to just take someone for a few weeks or maybe a month or two, but what happens with us? They cut our hours.

“I have a family, I have a mortgage—it’s too much. Sometimes you feel afraid even to stop. That is what happens. Sometimes the managers in there believe that they are the owners and make people think that they are doing you a favour if they give you more hours. But they are workers too, right? Everyone should be together because if we break, what are we going to do, what’s going to happen with these people, too? We are all together now.”



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