

Some hard truths about the unions' "Day of Action" for Ontario Electro-Motive workers

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Thousands of workers, their families, and young people will demonstrate today to show their support for the 475 locked-out London, Ontario Electro-Motive workers. A train locomotive manufacturer owned by Caterpillar, Electro-Motive is demanding wage cuts of more than 50 percent, the destruction of the workers' pension plan, and other sweeping contract concessions.

The Electro-Motive workers' struggle is winning support from across Ontario and beyond because workers recognize that Caterpillar is spearheading a ruling class offensive that targets all the gains workers wrested from big business and its political representatives—decent wages and pensions, universal public health care, and other public services—through the great social struggles of the last century.

But working people must beware.

Almost exactly one year ago, thousands of workers and young people gathered in the cold of Hamilton, Ontario in a similar CLC-OFL (Canadian Labour Congress-Ontario Federation of Labour) Day of Action to protest against US Steel's savage attack on the pension rights of workers at its Hamilton-area operations (formerly the property of Stelco). At the Jan. 29, 2011 rally, United Steel Workers (USW), OFL, CLC, and New Democratic Party (NDP) leaders trooped to the podium to denounce the corporation and the Harper federal Conservative government and to pledge that they would do everything in their power to ensure that the locked-out workers would last "one day longer" than the concession-demanding company.

But these pledges came to absolutely nothing. The unions refused to organize any industrial action in support of the locked-out US Steel workers and systematically isolated their struggle from those of the Canada Post, Air Canada, and other workers facing similar concession demands. Moreover, the USW

instructed its members at US Steel's US operations to continue working, preventing any united struggle against the steel giant, and ensuring the company could meet all its orders.

Thus abandoned, the Hamilton workers reluctantly voted last October—after almost a year on the picket line—to ratify a deal negotiated and endorsed by the USW that surrendered to virtually every one of US Steel's demands.

For the union and NDP leaders, the now two-decades-old practice of "Days of action" is an alibi for inaction—a mechanism for suppressing the class struggle and diverting workers into making futile appeals to the very politicians who are implementing the agenda of big business.

At today's "Day of Action" in support of the Caterpillar/Electro-Motive workers, the union and NDP bureaucrats will urge workers, just as they did in Hamilton a year ago, to focus their energies on urging the Harper Conservative government to change the Investment Canada Act to make the process whereby foreign takeovers are approved by the government "more transparent."

Never mind that Harper is spearheading the big business assault on worker rights and living standards and that last month his government dropped a lawsuit against US Steel for violating employment guarantees at Stelco's former Hamilton facilities.

The appeals to Harper are not just a diversion. They are part of the unions' and NDP's promotion of reactionary Canadian nationalism. In opposition to uniting workers across North America and around the world against any concessions and in defence of the jobs of all, the labor bureaucrats call for the defence of "Canadian jobs" and foster the lie that Canadian-owned enterprises are less ruthless and exploitative than

foreign-owned ones.

In every country, the union officials and social-democratic politicians have promoted the same filth, calling for the defence of “American” or “British” jobs, and thereby doing the employers’ bidding by pitting worker against worker. Invariably these calls have served as the pretext and cover for the unions’ role in implementing corporate restructuring, for imposing concessions and job cuts, so as to maintain the “competitiveness”, i.e. profitability, of “our” companies.

A second major theme of the union and NDP leaders’ speeches at today’s rally will be for workers to appeal to the Ontario Liberal government to pass an anti-scab bill. No matter that Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty has said repeatedly that his government will never do so, has illegalized strikes by Toronto Transit Commission workers, and is about to implement massive social spending cuts.

The calls by NDP politicians for anti-scab legislation is especially cynical and hypocritical as wherever the NDP has held office in the past decade—Nova Scotia, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan—it has refused to ban the use of strikebreakers, and otherwise pursued a rightwing agenda of social spending cuts and corporate tax breaks.

If history is not to be repeated, if the Electro-Motive workers’ courageous anti-concessions struggle is not to be lost, workers must wrest control of it from the unions and NDP and reject their ruinous nationalist and pro-capitalist program.

The CAW made major concessions in the last Electro-Motive contract—concessions that allowed the company to boost productivity by 20 percent and to browbeat many older workers into retirement. And the CAW national leadership has recently offered to make further concessions, if management returns to the bargaining table. All the fiery rhetoric from CAW President Ken Lewenza and the other union bureaucrats is bombast, meant to politically disarm the Electro-Motive workers and their swelling ranks of supporters.

These are hard truths, but they are truths that more and more workers know hit the mark.

In a statement issued to today’s rally, the Socialist Equality Party declares:

“Electro-Motive workers should form rank-and-file committees led by the most trusted militant workers so

as to organize their struggle independently of the CAW and coordinate joint action—demonstrations, strikes and occupations—with workers across North America whose jobs, pensions and livelihood are threatened by employer concession demands and by the austerity programs being pursued by governments of every political stripe.

“Such militant industrial action, while essential in developing a working-class counteroffensive, will only bring enduring gains if it is conceived of as a political struggle against the parties, governments and entire state machinery that upholds capitalist exploitation and social inequality. To defeat big business, workers need their own socialist political party which has as its aim the establishment of a workers’ government to nationalize corporations such as Caterpillar and turn them into public utilities democratically controlled by working people and run in the interests of society as a whole.”



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