

# Ontario premier feigns support for locked out Electro-Motive workers

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Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) President Ken Lewenza has praised Ontario Liberal Premier Dalton McGuinty for a speech he gave Tuesday in which he criticized Caterpillar-owned Electro-Motive for spurning “the balanced, made-in-Ontario approach” to labor relations that “requires that unions and management sit down and talk to try to work out their differences.”

Five weeks ago, Caterpillar locked out 470 workers at Electro-Motive’s London, Ontario diesel locomotive plant, after the workers rejected the company’s demands for a more than 50 percent wage cut, the destruction of their pension plan, and other sweeping concessions.

Speaking before the London Chamber of Commerce, McGuinty said he does “not look to insinuate myself into” contract disputes. “But this one strikes me as a little bit different.” His staff later told reporters that the Ministry of Labour was “reaching out” to Caterpillar to encourage it to resume negotiations with the CAW. The premier hinted that the province would be ready to work with other levels of government to provide tax or other benefits to Caterpillar if it scaled back its concession demands and desisted from shutting the London facility.

In an interview with the *Toronto Star*, Lewenza, whose CAW is the bargaining agent for the Electro-Motive workers, “thanked” McGuinty for “his support.”

In reality, McGuinty’s intervention in the Electro-Motive dispute is a reactionary ploy.

Far from supporting the Electro-Motive workers, McGuinty’s aim is to assist the CAW in securing a concessions-filled contract with Caterpillar.

As he made clear in his address and subsequent press conference, the premier expects “flexibility from both sides.” In other words, he is counting on the CAW to impose a contract on the Electro-Motive workers significantly inferior to the last one.

Lewenza and the CAW are more than ready to be “flexible.” In the last contract the union negotiated with

Electro-motive it agreed to changes in work rules that allowed the company to boost productivity by 20 percent just in 2011. Union officials have repeatedly said that they are ready to make still further concessions if only the company will forego its demand that, as a precondition for any resumption of negotiations, the union agree to slash labour costs by \$30 million a year.

McGuinty’s target, however, goes far beyond the Electro-Motive workers. His appeal for the company to employ a “made-in-Ontario approach” and work with the CAW was aimed at securing the cooperation of the unions in imposing sweeping social spending cuts, including cuts in the real wages of teachers, hospital workers and other provincial public-sector workers.

For weeks McGuinty and Finance Minister Dwight Duncan have been warning that public and social services must be sharply curtailed. Indeed, in the very speech in which McGuinty criticized Electro-Motive’s owners, he reiterated his government’s determination to make working people pay for the province’s \$16 billion annual budget deficit.

McGuinty vowed that “restraining” public sector workers’ wages, that is imposing cuts in real if not nominal wages, will be an essential element of his deficit elimination program. But, in a deliberate contrast with the official opposition Conservatives, he claimed that this will be achieved through negotiation and not by government-imposed wage cuts or freezes. “We will not be rash and we won’t be timid,” declared McGuinty. “... Our progress will be steady and relentless in the plan to eliminate the fiscal deficit by fiscal year 2017-18.”

The CAW’s praise for McGuinty’s intervention was entirely predictable.

The CAW and its allies in the Ontario Federation of Labour and Canadian Labour Congress are utterly opposed to mobilizing the strength of the working class in occupations, general strikes and other militant actions to

stop Caterpillar in its tracks, because that would bring it into headlong conflict with Ontario's pro-employer labor relations regime and constitute a mortal threat to the corporatist relations the unions have developed with big business over the past three decades.

Furthermore, the CAW is a close ally of the McGuinty Liberal government and has worked hand-in-glove with it in restoring profitability to the province's auto industry through layoffs, plant closures, and wage and benefit cuts. In a recent submission to the provincial government, Lewenza "thanked" the Ontario Liberal government for its role in the 2009 negotiations with the Detroit three carmakers that resulted in the imposition of wage and benefit cuts totaling more than \$19 per hour per worker.

The CAW supported McGuinty's re-election last October, trumpeting the Liberals' cynical claim that they are a "progressive" alternative to the Conservatives.

In fact, the Liberals have pursued the same basic big business agenda as the Conservatives. Just in the past two years, they have introduced further corporate tax cuts, outlawed strikes by Toronto Transit Commission workers, and facilitated Vale Inco's use of strikebreakers to impose concessions on striking nickel miners.

But while the Conservatives bait the union officialdom, the Liberals have acknowledged the critical role Lewenza and his fellow bureaucrats play in policing the working class by giving them seats on various tri-partite committees and routinely seeking their counsel.

Now McGuinty intends to enlist them as enforcers of brutal social spending cuts, reprising the role the CAW has played in the auto industry.

To retain any credibility with the rank-and-file, the union bureaucrats will perforce make an initial show of their opposition to McGuinty's spending cuts and wage "restraint" program; then seek to smother any genuine struggle against them, by arguing that it is preferable to "negotiate" with the Liberals than be subjected to the Conservatives' wage freeze.

There is one further point that need be made about Lewenza's response to McGuinty's remarks on the Electro-Motive lockout. While thanking the premier, the CAW President called on the Liberals to back up their criticisms of Caterpillar by introducing a law forcing a mediated or arbitrated settlement in especially bitter contract disputes.

This is a further reactionary trap. It channels workers' energies away from mobilizing their class strength and seeking the support of Caterpillar workers in the US and other countries and promotes the lie that the government

and the state are neutral arbiters between employer and workers, not the executive committee of the capitalist elite. Moreover, it is a boon to big business governments that are anxious to justify criminalizing worker resistance and imposing concessionary contracts. Recently the federal Conservative government used various pretexts, from purported threats to the economy to threats to public safety, to illegalize strikes by postal workers and flight attendants.

The struggle of the London Caterpillar workers has evoked widespread support and not only because of the flagrant injustice of a transnational company making record profits demanding their workers' wages be halved. Increasingly, working people recognize that the Caterpillar lockout is part of a ruling class offensive that targets all the social gains workers wrenched from big business and their political representatives in the social struggles of the last century—decent wages and pensions, universal health care, and other public services.

To galvanize this vast potential support the Caterpillar workers must seize the leadership of their struggle from the pro-capitalist CAW and its allies in the social-democratic NDP, through the building of rank-and-file committees independent of the union, and by spearheading an industrial and political offensive of the entire working class against all wage and job cuts and in defence of public services.



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