

Ontario elevator technicians continue strike action

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One thousand four hundred elevator technicians across Ontario are entering their fourth week on strike against transnational elevator companies Otis, KONE, Schindler and ThyssenKrupp.

The workers went on strike May 1, when talks broke down between the International Union of Elevator Constructors (IUEC) and the National Elevator and Escalator Association (NEEA)—the bargaining agent for the elevator companies. Although there was a clause allowing for negotiations to continue with the expiration of the previous contract, NEEA refused to enact the clause, tabling a “take-it-or-leave-it” offer that seeks to extend the workweek without premium pay and force concessions on travel time and staffing levels.

The technicians, who are regularly required to be on-call day or night, are fighting to maintain a semblance of family life as the employers seek to intensify a pace of work that puts not only workers but also the general public at risk. As one striker told the World Socialist Web Site, “The companies have forced us onto the picket lines. Wages aren’t a sticking point. We’re just trying to defend our conditions of work. If they get what they want, the companies will squeeze us every damn day of the year. What we do on the job is important. They want us running around like chickens. These are big safety questions for the public.”

Elevator technicians are highly skilled workers who undergo extensive training to meet the standards set by government regulations. The work entails not only elevator installation, repair and maintenance, but also the emergency extraction of trapped passengers. Hundreds of passenger extraction calls are received on any given day across the province.

The job comes with a certain degree of danger. Half a dozen elevator technicians—both unionized and

nonunionized—have died on the job over the past several years, including Andrew Hill, a father of five, who plunged to his death at Toronto’s TD Tower whilst working to rescue trapped passengers in 2009.

At the outset of the strike, the elevator companies gave undertakings that a combination of management personnel and replacement workers would be able to adequately service the tens of thousands of buildings across the province affected by the strike. However, spokespeople for the government regulatory body, the Technical Standards and Safety Authority, have already cited the illegal use of unqualified service technicians. Yet it has failed to taken any action against the companies responsible.

It has been reported that not only management personnel but even company salesmen have been deployed to service broken elevators. Service response-time guarantees issued by the companies have also fallen by the boards. Elevator repair orders are extensively backlogged with high-rise residential buildings and even hospitals reporting unserviced equipment. Unionized workers continue to be available for emergency responses, whilst municipal fire departments have also been deployed for emergency extractions.

Despite the reported violations, the big business Ontario Liberal government has done nothing to address the use of uncertified workers, simply announcing that the Ministry of Consumer Affairs is “keeping an eye” on the situation.

During the course of the dispute, the mainstream press has mounted a campaign not to highlight the intransigence of the elevator companies and the disregard for the safety and vertical mobility of hundreds of thousands of people, but to vilify the strikers. Stories of seniors isolated in old age homes

and of disabled people stuck in their high-rise apartments have filled the pages of newspapers in cities large and small across the province.

As one striker told the WSWs, “We’re not giving interviews. The media give us a two-part question and then they only play the first part and turn the camera on a poor old lady in a wheelchair and then they blame us. We were told by the companies that there was a contingency plan to take care of hospitals and seniors’ homes. They told us they have certified sales staff and truck drivers and they’re going to send them out and keep these elevators running. That’s not happening. And the government regulators are not backing us up either. The total story isn’t getting out there. They say we’re holding people hostage. But we offered to work through negotiations and they turned us down. We put public safety first but they came to us with a rotten deal and said take it or leave it.”

Neither property-management companies nor the elevator conglomerates have ever made the safety and vertical mobility of tenants a central priority. At several public and privately owned high-rise apartment buildings in downtown Toronto tenants spoke to the WSWs about the chronic inadequacy of elevator service.

At a middle-class building, a tenant recounted how elevator entrapments were common. “There’s only two small elevators to service some 24 floors and I’ll bet that half the weeks of the month one or the other is unserviceable. We had about six people trapped only last week. They were stuck for hours until the fire department got them loose.”

At Toronto’s sprawling St. Jamestown public housing complex, Bob Wilson and Prudah Kumarjendra, two disabled tenants in mobility scooters, responded with a chuckle when asked if elevator service had been lately compromised. “Are you kidding?” said Wilson. “I’ve lived here twenty years and the elevators have never worked. They’re always broken. I could still wait twenty minutes even if one or two are working. The management and City Hall just don’t give a damn about us. I guess it could be worse, though. A lot of people here are out of work so there’s not that rush in the mornings and at night to jam it up even further... The elevators are really old and they keep saying they’ll put new ones in but it never happens. And it’s not just the elevators. They’re slow

on repairs and I don’t even want to talk about the bedbugs and roach infestations. As far as I’m concerned, the strikers should get what they want. Life’s hard. I wouldn’t want to be teetering over some elevator shaft just to make a living.”



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