

USW isolates militant strike at Toronto Crown Holdings plant

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A strike of 120 workers at a Crown Holdings metal can manufacturing plant in north Toronto has entered its 17th month, with no end in sight. After almost a year and a half, it has become abundantly clear that the United Steelworkers Union (USW), the workers' bargaining representative, has absolutely no interest in fighting for the strikers' jobs and living standards.

Workers at the Toronto plant walked off the job in September 2013, after the USW had attempted to negotiate a wage increase—the first in nine years—but was rebuffed by management, which instead demanded an array of brutal concessions. Earlier that year, Crown had named the Toronto plant its safest and most productive in North America.

Among the claw-backs sought by management was the introduction of a two-tier wage system, cutting the pay for new hires to the poverty wage of just above \$11 per hour—the provincial minimum wage. Prior to the strike, new hires started at 80 percent of the full wage and gradually worked their way to \$24 per hour. The majority of workers at the plant are nearing retirement age or approaching 30 years' service. In other words, Crown wants to wipe the board clean and start over with a fresh slate of extremely low-paid industrial workers.

Crown also demanded the elimination of cost-of-living allowances and the continuation of a nine-year pension freeze.

The company responded to the USW walkout by recruiting strikebreakers from its non-unionized operations in Calgary, and hiring locally to plug the gaps. The scabs are bussed in, with picketers delaying them at the gate, under the watchful eye of the authorities, for a scant few minutes. Additional product is being shipped to Crown's Canadian customers from the company's US installations.

Many of the striking workers have had to take up part-time employment just to keep their heads above water, and some are now obliged to rely on food banks to sustain their families. The picket is maintained 24 hours a day, and each striker is responsible for 28 hours of picketing per week.

A giant transnational company, Crown Holdings is one of the world's largest manufacturers of metal cans and aerosol containers. It is estimated that Crown produces one out of every five beverage containers in the world and one out of every three food cans in North America. It counts some of Canada's most widely recognized brands as its clients, including the Labatt and Molson-Coors breweries, Cott Foods, and Cadbury. Headquartered in Philadelphia, it employs 21,900 workers in 149 plants across 41 countries.

The company doubled its profits from \$282 million in 2011 to \$557 million in 2012. CEO John Conway, who regularly ranks among *Forbes Magazine's* best-compensated corporate chiefs, took home earnings of some \$12.4 million in 2012, or almost 600 times what a new second-tier worker would earn at the Toronto plant. For the first nine months of 2014, the company made profits of \$374 million.

The attack on the Toronto workers is part of a relentless worldwide campaign on the part of Crown management to boost profits at workers' expense. Last year, company management sacked four workers in a Turkish plant for organizing a union drive and physically threatened workers who supported the union.

Last summer, Crown management attempted to further pit veteran workers at the Toronto plant against their newer counterparts, with a proposal to do away with the two-tier wage scheme and instead cut workers' pay across the board by 30 percent. This "offer" was flatly rejected in a 117-1 vote of the

strikers.

Shortly thereafter, Crown mounted a fresh provocation, announcing its intention to keep many of the scabs on permanently and to offer just 26 of the 120 strikers their jobs back should the dispute be settled. The union has filed an unfair labour practices complaint with the Ontario Labour Relations Board over the company's machinations.

Whilst the strikers have shown great determination, the USW has done everything to isolate their militant struggle and to direct workers to make futile appeals to the pro-austerity Ontario Liberal and NDP politicians to enact "anti-scab" legislation—something they have steadfastly refused to do notwithstanding decades of union lobbying efforts.

Even as Crown made preparations to close a Montreal manufacturing plant in late 2014, no efforts were made by union officials to unite with workers in industrial action there. Instead, the union meekly accepted the company move, simply offering "job placement assistance" to laid-off workers. The Toronto plant is now the last remaining unionized Crown facility in the country.

In an attempt to provide an alibi for their refusal to mobilize their hundreds of thousands of members in industrial action to support the Crown strikers, the USW and the Ontario Federation of Labour are calling for a consumer boycott of canned beer.

The USW has also sent 700 letters to Crown shareholders arguing that the strike has caused an 8-cent drop in share values. Arguing like a true corporate manager, Joe Drexler, USW's head of strategic campaigns in Canada, told reporters, "[Crown] could have settled the dispute fairly long ago for a fraction of the price...shareholders should be asking serious questions about this, especially since the Toronto facility was such a productive one."

Drexler and the labour bureaucracy he speaks for sound like businessmen because that is precisely what they are. Dedicated supporters of capitalism, and led by well-paid executives who benefit handsomely from membership dues and the control of various pension and investment funds, the union brass reject out of hand any attempt to expand the Crown strike, or any strike for that matter.

The shareholder protests and boycott campaigns employed by the USW have a long, sad history. Time

and again, such campaigns have been used to smother militant struggles, paving the way for the imposition of concession contracts and massive job losses.

While such campaigns have meant the kiss of death for numerous strikes, mounting "corporate campaigns" has become a veritable cottage industry. Former union organizers who pioneered the tactic now operate successful consulting firms that manage such protests.

The "corporate campaign tactic" was developed by the middle-class left in the 1970s and embraced by the union bureaucracy in the 1980s, after US president Ronald Reagan's firing of the air traffic controllers initiated a massive North America-wide corporate union-busting drive, as a means of suppressing the class struggle. Workers were channeled away from mass action—strikes, occupations and so forth—that would inevitably have entailed a confrontation with the police, courts and big business governments and posed the necessity an independent working class political challenge to the existing social-political order. Instead, workers' energies were dissipated through protest stunts, aimed at appealing to stockholders, advertisers and individual customers to convince the corporations to let up in their attacks on their workforces.

Striking Crown Holding workers have rightly said on many occasions that they are striking not only for themselves, but for all workers. To mobilize the support of other workers, they must take the conduct of their strike out of the hands of the union and fight to extend it to other Crown plants and the broader working population.

Such a strategy, which will inevitably involve a collision with the pro-employer courts and government, must be connected with a political offensive of the working class against the capitalist system and all the big business parties, which are equally committed to the impoverishing the working class so as to swell the profits of the giant corporations.



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