

Michigan governor prepares to deploy National Guard to replace locked-out roadway workers

Tim Rivers
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In an escalation of the three-week lockout of roadway construction workers on 100 highway projects throughout Michigan, the contractors' association and Republican Governor Rick Snyder are preparing to use National Guard troops as strikebreakers.

On September 4, the Michigan Infrastructure and Transportation Association (MITA)—which is made up large concrete, excavation, asphalt and other private construction companies, locked out as many as 2,000 construction workers after the labor agreement expired in June and negotiations on a new contract reportedly led to a conflict over hiring practices and health care benefits.

The workers, members of Operating Engineers Local 324, run machines like earth movers, front-end loaders, bucket loaders on tracks, cranes and other heavy equipment.

During the road-building season, it is not uncommon for these men and women to work 12 hours a day, seven days a week. Workers need the extra money they make on overtime to support their families through the winter months and the extra hours they bank in fringe benefit funds to maintain their health insurance and retirement funds for the time when they are off work.

On Friday afternoon, WXYZ Channel 7 reported that the MITA was “working with the National Guard on how to best deploy National Guard equipment operators to road projects currently shut down because of a defensive lockout with Operating Engineers, Local 324.”

MITA Executive Vice President Mike Nystrom said in a statement, “MITA is in direct conversations with high-ranking officials at the National Guard about how the industry and National Guard might work together to

jumpstart road projects that have been affected by the Operating Engineers, Local 324 (OE 324) defensive lockout. MITA is surveying its members to determine specific operator needs required to temporarily replace all OE 324 members in terms of numbers, qualifications and geographical needs across the state.”

While preparing to deploy troops, Snyder brought in union leaders for a meeting with administration officials on the pretext of restarting negotiations. After the meeting, union officials agreed to a “cooling-off” period, which would send workers back on the job without a new contract while the governor’s office mediated talks between the contractors and the union. The mediator chosen by the governor was a mediator in the 2013-14 Detroit bankruptcy, when unions signed onto the Snyder administration’s “Grand Bargain” plan that looted the pensions and health benefits of municipal workers and sold off public assets to pay off wealthy bondholders.

According to the union, “OE324 agreed to the plan the Governor’s office was forcing, and officials left with a handshake agreement in place.” In a press release afterwards, however, the union said MITA refused the agreement after the meeting, and then said the governor’s office “reneged on the agreement and is now demanding a host of MITA-imposed conditions.”

The governor’s office denounced the union’s statement as “patently untrue,” claiming, “Neither side accepted our numerous offers to help find a resolution.” The statement continued: “This unacceptable work stoppage will put motorists’ safety at risk this winter. Gov. Snyder remains committed to resolving this situation and is looking at what options are available to finish projects as quickly as possible,” including,

“activating the National Guard and using their heavy equipment operators for roadwork.”

What the governor is preparing to do is use the military to break a strike. It recalls similar moves by Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker who in 2011 threatened to call out the National Guard if teachers and other public employees walked out on strike against his plans to strip workers of collective bargaining rights. It also recalls the use of military air traffic controllers by President Reagan when he fired 13,000 striking air traffic controllers in 1981.

The deployment of military troops has infamous precedents in Michigan, including the dispatch of 4,000 National Guard soldiers against the General Motors sit-down strikers in Flint in 1936-37. During the urban uprising in Detroit in 1967, police and US military forces, including those who had arrived directly from the jungles of the Vietnam War, killed 43 workers and youth, injured another 1,189, and arrested over 7,000.

The concern for motorists and their safety proclaimed by Governor Snyder or Warren Mayor Jim Fouts—who is demanding the declaration of a state of emergency over the labor dispute—is entirely fraudulent. The governor and both the Republicans and the Democrats in the state legislature have systematically starved the roadways of funds even as they hand over huge tax cuts to the auto industry and other corporations whose heavy trucks tear up the roadways, leading to accidents and chronic tire and car damage.

In the face of the provocative actions of the contractors and the Snyder administration, the unions have continually waved the white flag of surrender. The Operating Engineers was willing to send its members to work without a contract all summer long, even as MITA was withholding benefit payments, jeopardizing the health insurance and retirement funds of workers. In the face of the latest threats, the OE and other unions are preparing to capitulate again.

The National Labor Relations Board and the Democratic Party will not defend workers’ rights. It is up to workers themselves to fight.

That is why workers must take control of the struggle by electing rank-and-file committees to reach out to all construction workers and every other section of the working class to oppose this strikebreaking threat. If the governor can crush the roadway workers, similar methods will be used against every other section of

workers.

That is why autoworkers, teachers and other workers must come to the defense of the locked-out workers, including organizing mass picketing against any efforts to use National Guard troops as scabs.

At the same time, rank-and-file committees of heavy equipment operators should monitor all negotiations and provide detailed reports to the membership. No more secret negotiations and backroom deals.



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