

Snyder administration backs strikebreaking threat by Michigan road construction contractors

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Officials of the Michigan Infrastructure and Transportation Association (MITA) representing construction contractors say they are prepared to bring in strikebreakers starting Friday to restart road construction projects halted by an employer lockout of heavy equipment operators.

The MITA locked out some 2,000 workers, members of Operating Engineers Local 324, on September 4 over a dispute on a new contract. The lockout halted work on more than 100 road projects throughout the state. The previous contract expired in June, but Local 324 ordered its members to continue working, despite mounting provocations by the contractors.

The strikebreaking threat follows declarations by Michigan Republican Governor Rick Snyder that he was prepared to use National Guard troops to replace locked out operating engineers to restart work on key road projects. The intervention of Snyder emboldened the MITA, which said it is now looking to hire heavy equipment operators, including workers from out of state.

The locked out workers operate equipment critical for most road operations like earth-movers, front-end loaders, bucket loaders on tracks, cranes and other equipment. They often work 12 hours a day, seven days a week during road building season.

At a press conference Tuesday, Snyder said he had met with union and MITA officers and that neither a short-term or long-term solution could be reached. In comments that dripped with hypocrisy about “protecting the citizens of Michigan,” he piously asserted that he was not taking sides in the dispute. Instead, he said, he was looking at “other options” to get road work started before winter conditions made

road work impossible.

After lamenting that his administration did not have the legal authority to declare a state of emergency and impose a back-to-work order on the operating engineers, Snyder said he was ready to deploy the National Guard to restart selective highway projects.

“We have engineering units in the National Guard that operate heavy equipment and they have been deployed around the world for roadway construction,” the governor said. “Our goal is not to take over Operating Engineers union or take over all the projects. I have to look were there projects with particular safety and commuter traffic problems. I believe I have the authority to do that.”

A spokesman for the National Guard said they are ready to intervene. “It’s a mission, and we’re going to do all we can do if asked to support the governor and the citizens in the state of Michigan,” said Major General Greg Vadnais.

For all the declamations about concern for citizens, it is well recalled that this administration oversaw the devastating water crisis in Flint, that resulted in the lead poisoning of 100,000 residents, including vulnerable children. Leading figures in his administration are facing criminal indictment for abetting this social disaster.

As far as the roads are concerned, the Snyder administration and both parties in the state legislature have handed over huge tax cuts to big corporations while systematically starving the state’s infrastructure on necessary resources of maintenance and repair. This has led to disastrous road conditions and chronic tire and car damage for commuters.

Several hours after Snyder’s press conference, Mike

Nystrom, vice president of the MITA said, contractors were looking for temporary workers out of state to replace the locked out workers. “We’re helping contractors find folks from out of state,” some unionized and some not, he added. He conceded, however, that finding qualified replacements might be difficult.

A retired heavy equipment operator told the *World Socialist Web Site* it would be hard to replace locked out workers. “It’s not an easy profession. People that operate large heavy equipment, it takes a lot of skill and experience. You are running very hard equipment in difficult conditions.”

That being said, workers should be under no illusions about the ruthlessness of the employers and the Democratic and Republican political establishment. No resources will be spared to crush the operating engineers. Under conditions of mounting class struggle, the ruling class would like nothing better than to make an example of Michigan heavy equipment operators in order to enforce ever greater levels of austerity on the working class.

For its part, the Operating Engineers union has said it won’t negotiate with the MITA, citing its provocative actions, including the withholding of benefit payments, jeopardizing the healthcare and pensions of workers. It has sought instead to negotiate separate deals with individual employers.

Local 324 has desperately sought to avoid a confrontation with the contractors. Last week it agreed to a cooling off period that would have sent workers back on the job without under a contract extension while the Snyder administration mediated talks with the contractors. The mediator that Snyder proposed was one of those that oversaw the Detroit bankruptcy, when the unions signed off on a settlement that looted retiree pensions and public assets.

In a press conference after this early meeting with officials from the governor’s office, Local 324 said the MITA and the Snyder administration reneged on the agreement. For its part the Snyder administration called the union’s statement “patently untrue,” reiterating its determination to restart road construction work, with the assistance of the National Guard if necessary.

In the face of the mounting attacks on the operating engineers the unions have done everything to isolate these embattled workers and prevent a broader

mobilization. Local 324 has not issued a call for support from other construction unions, let alone from the broader working class.

All workers must come to the support of the heavy equipment operators against any attempt to restart operations through the use of strikebreakers or National Guard troops. If the attack on the operating engineers is carried through it will be used a precedent to attack broader sections of workers coming into struggle, autoworkers, teachers, hotel workers and Amazon workers.

It should be remembered that the attack mounted on the PATCO air traffic controllers by President Reagan in 1981, using US military personnel, set the pattern for an unrelenting drive by corporate America against the working class to rip back past gains, which has continued to this day. The watchword must be an injury to one is an injury to all.

Workers cannot look to the corporatist unions to lead this fight. Workers should mobilize now to oppose the strikebreaking operation of the MITA and the Snyder administration by forming rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, to mobilize support for their struggle. The call must be raised for the preparation of a general strike to oppose the state sanctioned strikebreaking operation against road workers.



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