Operating engineers' union bows to strikebreaking threats by Michigan governor, contractors

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Less than 24 hours before a Michigan contractors' association was set to begin hiring scab replacements for 2,000 roadway construction workers it had locked out, Operating Engineers Local 324 ordered its members to return to work without a contract or any resolution to the dispute that has closed 164 road building projects for more than three weeks.

The locked-out workers, who run bulldozers, backhoes on tracks, front-end loaders and the huge machines that place and level concrete for road construction, began returning to work Thursday afternoon, a statement from the Operating Engineers said.

The degrading and entirely predictable capitulation by the union also followed threats by Republican Governor Rick Snyder to deploy National Guard soldiers trained to operate heavy equipment to restart the projects.

In announcing the end to the standoff, the governor made clear the one-sided nature of the deal, which will send workers back to their job sites without any agreement that contractors would reimburse them for lost benefits or begin making payments into their health insurance and retirement plans.

"This is great news," gloated Snyder. "The vital work of getting Michigan's roads repaired should not have stalled, but the important thing now is that projects will be getting back on track. A long-term solution to the contract negotiations still needs to be worked out, but that can and should be done after this construction season is completed."

The governor who personally oversaw the lead poisoning of Flint and looting of pensions and public assets during the bankruptcy of Detroit cynically added, "I appreciate that both sides were able to see how important the work they do is to the safety and quality of life of all Michiganders."

Snyder neglected to mention that the contractors, members of the Michigan Infrastructure and Transportation Association (MITA), bear the entire responsibility for the work stoppage. When the operating engineers contract expired on June 1, MITA executives demanded control of the manning of all jobs and withheld payments to the health and pension accounts. The association then locked out the 2,000 workers, bringing construction to a halt.

The union also agreed to the governor's demand to submit to mediation. Snyder previously announced that the process would be overseen by a mediator in the 2013-2014 Detroit bankruptcy proceedings who helped author the "Grand Bargain." The deal rewarded the unions for their collaboration in gutting public employees' health care and retirement benefits.

"We still have issues to work out and will represent the best interests of our members throughout those negotiations, as we always have," Local 324 President Ken Dombrow said in a statement. "We appreciate Gov. Snyder's willingness to not take sides and to remain focused on finding a way to get the work done. The operating engineers of Michigan have an important job to do and we're happy that now they can start doing it again."

This is a fraud. From the beginning Snyder took the side of the contractors and wanted to make an example of the roadway workers in order to encourage other employers to press ahead with their attacks on workers.

In the face of the strikebreaking threat, which was reminiscent of President Reagan's firing of 13,000

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PATCO air traffic controllers in 1981, neither the Operating Engineers nor the United Auto Workers, Detroit Metropolitan nor the Michigan AFL-CIO bothered to call a demonstration, let alone mass picketing at the highway sites. In fact, the UAW and Detroit and Michigan labor federations were completely silent on the strikebreaking threat.

The leading Democratic candidates were also silent. Gubernatorial candidate Gretchen Whitmer—who has made "Fix the Damn Roads!" one of her chief slogans—said nothing about the conspiracy to replace locked out workers with strikebreakers and national guardsmen. Backing Whitmer earlier this month, local union president Ken Dombrow said, "Operating Engineers 324 is proud to endorse Gretchen as our next governor because we know she will put working men and women first."

Incumbent Democratic congresswoman in the 12th District, Debbie Dingell, who has received tens of thousands in contributions from the operating engineers and other unions, was also silent. The only candidate to denounce the strikebreaking operation was her opponent in the 12th Congressional District, Socialist Equality Party candidate Niles Niemuth, who called on workers to mobilize their independent strength to oppose the strikebreaking by the Snyder administration and the employers. This included, he said, making "preparations for a general strike against the use of National Guard troops."

The last thing the unions wanted, however, was the mobilization of the working class, which would quickly develop into a direct clash not only with the Republican Snyder administration, but with the Democrats as well. The unions' chief concern was not defending the rights of rank-and-file road workers but collaborating with state politicians to preserve the income and institutional interests of the labor apparatus. This includes the union bureaucracy's control over the training and hiring process and the multi-million health care and retirement funds.

Throughout the dispute, union local 324 repeatedly groveled before the contractors and Snyder. When the contract expired at the beginning of June the union ordered its members to continue working. Having taken the measure of the union, MITA was emboldened to lock the workers out on September 4 and conspire with the governor to ram through its dictates.

Despite the clear threat to rank-and-file operators from the union's capitulation, a local 324 spokesman continued to sow as much complacency as possible. "For us, it's pretty much a return from where we stood before Labor Day with the added exception of sitting down with contractors for state mediation, which we welcomed and continue to welcome," union spokesman Dan McKernan stated. "We couldn't be happier that our members are going to go back to work," McKernan concluded.

In contrast to the groveling by the Operating Engineers union, rank-and-file workers took to social media to oppose this attack. "I hope they don't come back until they get a new contract," said one worker in a Facebook posting. "The workers have the advantage and should use it. When times are lean the government will tell workers 'take it or leave it' because they have the leverage. If the roads are so important, then give them what they want. Cut some of the ridiculous spending in Lansing to make it up." Another worker, a member of the carpenters and millwrights union, said, "Stand Strong my Brothers."

The betrayal of this struggle by the operating engineers and other unions only underscores the necessity of workers electing rank-and-file factory and workplace committees to take the conduct of their struggles into their own hands. These committees, which must operate independently of the pro-company unions, must take up the fight for good-paying and secure jobs, fully funded, employer-paid health care and pension benefits and safe working conditions.

The development of new organizations of struggle to unify every section of workers must be linked up with a new political strategy to mobilize the working class against both corporate-controlled parties and the profit system they defend.

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