

Michigan road workers strike major regional contractor

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More than 200 heavy-equipment operators in Michigan working without a contract since June 2018 walked off the job July 31 to oppose the subcontracting of jobs and to demand more than \$1.8 million in back pay and the ending of wage violations. The workers, members of Operating Engineers (OE) Local 324, struck against Indiana-based Rieth-Riley Construction Co., one of the largest road pavers and asphalt suppliers in Michigan, threatening the shutdown of all of the company's supply yards and road construction projects during the peak mid-summer season.

Last summer 2,000 operators were locked out by employers who are members of the Michigan Infrastructure and Transportation Association for four weeks, halting 160 road projects commissioned by the Michigan Department of Transportation. Michigan's Republican governor at the time, Rick Snyder, and the contractors' association threatened to use National Guardsmen to replace the locked-out workers.

Less than 24 hours before the strikebreakers were scheduled to begin work, the union capitulated, signing a deal with nearly all of the road-building contractors involved. Rieth-Riley, the largest contractor involved with some 90 job sites and more than a dozen yards supplying materials for projects from Petoskey in northern lower Michigan to Benton Harbor in the southwest part of the state, was the most notable holdout.

A spokesman for the union said "members have stated they're [committed to the strike] for the long haul. Hopefully it won't go on much longer, but they have resolve."

Michigan's new Democratic governor, Gretchen Whitmer, is doubtless counting on the OE Local 324 union executives to isolate the strike and prevent the political issues which form the context of the struggle

from emerging into the open.

Last September, the executive of Local 324 endorsed Whitmer as a "fighter for working people." At the time, Whitmer declared, "Right now, the average Michigander pays \$540 a year on vehicle repairs. It's time we start fixing our roads instead of fixing our cars. ... Everyone should be able to take their kids to school or drive to work safely without blowing a tire or busting a windshield."

The facts are beyond dispute. The state's infrastructure is disintegrating. Glaring examples include bridges that spall and shed concrete from rusting rebar and roads pock-marked with gaping potholes that form a constant threat to both vehicles and human safety.

But Whitmer is no different from her Republican counterparts. Whatever repairs are made will be paid for by the working class through regressive taxes and escalating attacks on the jobs, living standards and pensions of the workers who repair the highways.

Michigan allows the highest truck weight loads in the nation as an indulgence to the auto industry. Studies show that these big trucks beat up the roads daily at no cost to the corporations or their stockholders.

On March 8 this year, the *Detroit Free Press* ran an article entitled, "General Motors, Ford tax breaks show capitalism's favoritism," which stated, "General Motors and Ford have paid little or no federal taxes for years, despite reaping billions in profits." In addition to federal tax breaks, GM and Ford—which are laying off tens of thousands of production and salaried workers—also receive hundreds of millions of dollars in state tax abatements and subsidies from Michigan, Ohio and other industrial states.

The big business politicians who populate both houses of the state legislature will not do anything that

interferes with the profit interests of these corporate behemoths or local billionaires, such as Dan Gilbert and the Ilitch family, who have received endless tax breaks, real estate grants and massive loans to pursue their speculative developments in downtown Detroit.

Whitmer's proposal for a \$0.45 per gallon tax on gasoline to raise the \$2.5 billion to fix the roads is another wholly regressive measure that shifts the burden of repair from the perpetrators of the devastation to its victims. Under her plan the cost will be borne by workers, who have no choice but to navigate the dangerous roads to get to work and pay the cost of replacing tires, ball-joints and other under-body parts.

Many of the workers who are on strike for back pay and job protections are painfully aware of the situation. "The rise of any tax in Michigan, seems to be nothing but a foolish ploy to pamper the minds of the citizens that pay them," operating engineer John Wamble posted on Facebook. "What services do the people of Michigan get for their road tax, gasoline tax, license plate fees, property tax etc,etc. The truth is; all taxes from local and state government are not (nor have they ever been) used for the single purpose that they were implemented for." He concludes, "Our roads will never be fixed properly!!!"

The struggle of the roadworkers for good pay and secure jobs is a political struggle against the whole economic setup. That is why roadworkers must take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the pro-capitalist and nationalist unions and build new organizations of struggle. Rank-and-file workplace committees should spread the strike to all roadwork operations and reach out to autoworkers, teachers and every section of the working class to prepare an industrial and political counter-offensive by the working class.

The resources exist to provide good living standards and a vast improvement in the infrastructure. But this will require a frontal assault on the concentrated wealth of the corporate and financial oligarchy, which owns and controls the global corporations and just as surely controls both political parties. This is why workers must adopt a socialist strategy to reorganize economic life to meet the needs of society, not the profit interests of the ultra-rich.



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