Unifor’s attempt to impose concessions contracts on Saskatchewan workers meeting widespread opposition

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Opposition is growing among 5,000 Saskatchewan Crown corporation workers to the efforts of Unifor, the country’s largest industrial union, to impose sellout contracts on them. Most of the proposed agreements are for five years and include a two-year wage freeze. All would leave the workers—who are employed by SaskTel and six other Saskatchewan-owned enterprises or Crown corporations—earning significantly less in real terms than they do today.

After sabotaging a 17-day strike last month and bowing to the right-wing Saskatchewan Party government’s demands for wage “restraint,” Unifor officials have been confronted with outraged workers at ratification meetings. Voting on the proposed contracts continues this week.

Adding to the workers’ ire is that the same politicians who are insisting the province’s Crowns can’t afford to compensate workers for inflation just rewarded themselves a 2.3 percent “cost-of-living” increase. As for the management at Saskatchewan’s Crowns, since 2007 they have received salary increases more than double that of the workforce.

According to Unifor, through “creative” negotiating it secured total pay “increases” of between 7 and 8 percent over five years. The details of the agreements that are now emerging suggest this is a lie. But even if the union’s claims are accepted at face value, when inflation, which is running at 2 percent or more, is taken into account, workers will suffer a loss in purchasing power

A SaskTel worker reported to CKOM on the angry reaction at a union meeting. Union officials, explained the worker, “kind of pumped themselves up about how they got the best deal that they could” and had “worked really hard,” then “basically 10 minutes into the ratification meeting, they finally kind of revealed that the zero per cents were still on the table, and at that point you could see the mood in the room shift quite a bit.”

The worker, who said he voted against the deal, described how a fellow worker shouted at the union representatives before walking out of the meeting. He went on to describe the settlement as a “slap in the face,” and added that many colleagues only voted in favour of the proposed agreement because they couldn’t afford to go on strike again in the lead-up to Christmas.

Summing up the widespread frustration among the rank and file, the SaskTel worker remarked to the CKOM News reporter, “What was the point?” of the strike.

The 17-day strike was the largest job action to hit the province in decades. It involved workers at SaskPower, SaskTel, SaskWater, SaskEnergy, the Water Security Agency and two SaskTel subsidiaries.

Immediately after Unifor announced on Oct. 20 that it had reached tentative contract settlements with the Crowns, it instructed workers to take down picket lines and return to work. It did so without releasing any details of the proposed contracts, let alone securing their ratification.

Not coincidentally, the first agreements Unifor chose to put to a vote, those with two small SaskTel subsidiaries SecurTek and Directwest, are from all accounts those that provide the highest wage increases, But under their terms—a 1 percent increase in 2019 and two percent in each of 2020 and 2021—workers would still experience a cut in real wages. Moreover, the agreements do not compensate the SecurTek and Directwest workers for the last two years during which their wages were frozen.

Press reports say the deal Unifor has struck on behalf of the 3,000 SaskTel employees largely follows the government’s “framework.” It is said to begin with two years of zero percent increases, followed by 1 percent in the third and 2 percent in each of the fourth and fifth years.

Going into the negotiations, the right-wing government of Premier Scott Moe demanded that any wage settlement meet the budgetary "mandate" of no more than five percent over five years with lump sum payments added to compensate for zero percent increases in the first two years of the deal.

When shutting down the strike, Unifor President Jerry Dias said, "I'm not going to get into details because our members need to see it first, but we believe we definitely beat the mandate. That doesn't mean the two zeroes don't exist, it just means that we found ways to beat the mandate."

Public support for the Crown workers was strong across the province. But from the get-go, Unifor made it clear that it would not be party to a major confrontation with the government. Only a few days into the walkout, SaskTel workers, who comprised three-fifths of the 5,000 strikers, were instructed by union officials to take down their picket lines and go back to work under a work-to-rule campaign.

However, management refused this climbdown without an undertaking that workers would not at some future date rejoin the strike. Some workers in other Crown Corporations, confused by the instructions at SaskTel, believed the strike was over and began trickling into work. Many others denounced the union manoeuvre. It took another day for Unifor to re-establish full picketing across the province.

The following week, the province announced that the Unifor local that organizes 138 workers at the Water Security Agency had broken ranks with the strike and reached a separate deal along the lines of the initial government demands.

Then, just two days before it announced the October 20th settlement, Unifor asked the government to agree to binding arbitration in exchange for ending the strike. When this offer was turned down, the union—which had threatened to widen its picket lines—instead signed on to the miserable concessions agreements. To date, several small locals representing a few hundred workers have ratified their contracts—although Unifor has refused to release the vote counts. However, over four thousand workers have yet to complete voting on their tentative agreements.

The austerity contract pushed by Unifor and the government is a reflection of the wider attacks waged against workers in Saskatchewan and across the country. For years the ruling Saskatchewan Party government has drained the Crown corporations of their profits in order to backstop budget deficits created by its earlier tax cuts to corporations and the wealthy. The party came to power in 2007 after massive popular disaffection with the New Democratic Party, which, during 16 years in government, closed 52 medical facilities and over 100 schools, and came into bitter conflict with public sector workers and nurses.

Premier Moe's attempt to foist a concessions-filled agreement on the Crown corporation workers is tied to his government's drive to meet its 2019 and 2020 deficit targets. Saskatchewan Party governments, which for years have appointed its supporters to the boards of publicly owned companies, have pursued privatization schemes throughout provincial infrastructure. It has been estimated that in the last decade over $1.1 billion in public assets have been eliminated and at least 1,200 jobs outsourced. Moe is an advocate of the further dismantling of Canada's public health system via privatization.

The anti-worker policies in Saskatchewan are of a piece with a growing assault on the working class across the country and internationally. In Ontario, the much-hated regime of Premier Doug Ford has slashed public services, student aid, welfare payments, the minimum wage and labour standards. Last week, Alberta's Conservative government announced that it is seeking wage cuts of between 2 and 5 percent from 180,000 provincial public sector workers.

There is mounting resistance to these attacks. An escalating job action by 5,000 Vancouver transit workers has begun to impact commuter services. This past week, tens of thousands of Ontario teachers voted to strike, challenging the Ford Conservative government's savage education cuts and plans, soon to be backed by legislation, to limit wage and benefit increases well below the inflation rate for the next three years.