

Unifor imposes concessions contracts on Saskatchewan Crown Corporation workers

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19 November 2019

Unifor has rammed through concessionary contracts for 5,000 Saskatchewan Crown Corporation workers in the face of strong opposition. Although Canada's largest private sector union has bragged that worker ratification votes overwhelmingly supported the agreements, which impose real terms pay cuts, Unifor, in a brazenly antidemocratic move, is refusing to release the final vote totals.

The 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. Unifor refused to release any details of the proposed contracts, let alone secure their ratification before ending the strike. The union did so because what was on offer manifestly abandoned worker demands. The union clearly feared that had the terms of the rotten deal they had struck with Saskatchewan's right-wing government been immediately made public, workers would have rebelled and refused to end their 17-day strike.

The union bureaucrats' fears were well founded. When workers learned of the sellout terms at informational meetings across the province, many reacted with outrage. Attendees told local media outlets that several workers shouted down union officials before storming out of the meetings in disgust.

For months, both national and local Unifor officials told workers that they would not accept the government's demand for "zero percent pay increases"—i.e. a wage freeze—in the first two years of five-year agreements. At a rally of 2,000 strikers in Regina one week into the job action, Dave Kuntz, a local union president at SaskTel, said, "We know what fairness is. We know cost of living

is a fair benchmark for fairness. Zeros don't cut it. Zero is a wage rollback in my mind."

Workers then marched through the streets of the provincial capital, chanting, "Two-point-three—it's good enough for Moe, it's good enough for me." The slogan referred to the demand of workers to receive a 2.3 percent annual increase—the same increase that the province's Saskatchewan Party premier, Scott Moe, pushed through the legislature for sitting politicians as a hedge against inflation.

But weeks after Unifor had wrapped up the strike, workers, presented for the first time with the contents of the proposed settlement and then ordered to immediately vote on it, were shocked to learn that the tentative agreements included two years of zero wage increases, and that, due to inflation, at the end of the agreements, most of which are for 5 or 6 years, they will be earning significantly less in real terms than today.

The only workers not subject to zero-zero increases are the small number who work for the two SaskTel subsidiaries, SecurTek and Directwest. But this is only because their wages had already been frozen for two years.

The 3,000 SaskTel workers received a five percent increase over five years. SaskPower, SaskWater and SaskEnergy workers received seven percent over six years and Water Agency workers got six percent over six years. Other than the extended length of some of the deals, the total wages did not differ from the government's initial draconian demands. As one worker, reflecting the mood of the membership, exclaimed to reporters, "What was the point (of the strike)?" He added that, although disgusted with the sell-out, many members would nonetheless vote for the settlement due to economic hardship.

Yet, for Unifor national president Jerry Dias, the strike was "a success." Workers got "a contract they deserve" after taking "historic direct action" for a "superior" deal.

Such bare-faced lying is the stock-in-trade of Dias and Unifor for every concessions deal they impose on workers.

Like a back-alley flimflam man, Dias conjures up “victories” from the bitter defeats suffered by rank-and-file Unifor members across the country.

At Bombardier, in Thunder Bay, where 200 workers received layoff notices last week, as a “down payment” on a projected layoff of another 350 workers next spring, Dias bragged of his successful showdown with management.

In Oshawa, where the GM Assembly plant will be shuttered in a matter of weeks, permanently eliminating the jobs of at least 5,000 production and Oshawa-area auto parts workers, Dias called the disaster “bittersweet” because about 300 jobs would be at least temporarily saved. Workers will remember Dias hailing the 2016 GM give-back contract settlement as “historic” for supposedly guaranteeing the Oshawa jobs.

The austerity contract pushed by Unifor and the Saskatchewan Party government is an integral part of the wider attacks being mounted against workers in Saskatchewan and across the country. Only two weeks ago, 11,000 Saskatchewan public servants organized in the Saskatchewan Government Employees Union also ratified an agreement that will see their real wages reduced.

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 nurses and other public sector workers.

Moe’s Saskatchewan Party government has pursued privatization schemes throughout provincial infrastructure for over a decade. According to estimates, over \$1.1 billion in public assets have been sold off and at least 1,200 jobs outsourced over the past ten years. Moe is an advocate of the further dismantling of Canada’s public health system via privatization and has aligned himself with hard-right Alberta Premier Jason Kenney’s push to revise the federal equalization system.

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. Earlier this month, Ford secured passage of Bill 124, which caps total wage and benefit increases for over 1 million public sector workers at 1 percent per annum for the next three years. Like Moe in Saskatchewan, Ford has only been able to carry out this onslaught thanks to the trade unions’ demobilization of all worker opposition and acceptance of austerity.

Alberta’s Conservative government recently announced that it is seeking wage cuts of between 2 and 5 percent from 180,000 provincial public sector workers. In Quebec, the right-wing populist Coalition Avenir Quebec government underscored its commitment to austerity earlier this month by ploughing most of a massive multibillion-dollar budget surplus into debt repayment.

There is mounting resistance to these attacks. An escalating job action by 5,000 Vancouver transit workers has begun to impact commuter services. In the past three weeks, close to two hundred thousand Ontario elementary and high-school teachers have voted to strike, challenging the Ford Conservative government’s savage education cuts.

However, Unifor’s sellout in Saskatchewan underscores once again that this incipient opposition can develop into a genuine struggle for better living and working conditions only if workers break politically and organizationally from the pro-capitalist unions. They must fight to establish rank-and-file action committees, so as to appeal to workers across Canada and internationally to mount an offensive against capitalist austerity and for workers’ political power, and to organize defiance of the battery of anti-strike laws.



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