

Saskatchewan NDP silent on oil refinery lockout

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18 January 2020

Seven hundred and fifty workers at the Co-op Refinery Complex (CRC) in Regina, Saskatchewan are engaged in a bitter fight against a state-supported drive to slash their pensions.

Members of Unifor Local 594, the workers have been locked out since December 5. With the explicit support of the province's right-wing Saskatchewan Party government, the courts and the police, CRC has brought in scabs, who, working with managers, have kept the refinery's operations going.

Throughout the now more than six-week-long dispute, the union-supported New Democratic Party (NDP), which forms the Official Opposition in the Saskatchewan legislature, has remained silent about the pivotal class battle raging at CRC.

Party leader Ryan Meili has failed to voice even nominal support for the workers, let alone criticized the police and courts for shepherding scabs across the CRC workers' picket lines. A survey of postings on the Saskatchewan NDP's official website and its Facebook page shows that it has made no mention of the dispute whatsoever.

The NDP's silence stands in sharp contrast to the actions of the government, the courts and right-wing media commentators who continue to deliberately mischaracterize the contract battle as a "strike." Don Morgan, the Labour Minister in the Scott Moe-led Saskatchewan Party provincial government, announced early in the lockout that he was "watching the dispute closely" with an eye to intervening against the workers should picketing significantly impact production at the refinery.

For over a decade, the Saskatchewan Party government has mounted major attacks on workers' rights and living standards, including restricting public sector workers' right to strike through "essential services" legislation.

The government has made clear that it fully backs CRC's scab operation and stands ready to intervene legislatively in the company's support if workers mobilize to shut down the refinery's operations. In late November, Morgan told reporters that the government would not tolerate any worker job action that halted production at the refinery and was ready to use its "toolbox of legislative options" to keep the refinery operating, but had no objection to the company's extensive "contingency plans"—i.e., its deployment of scabs.

The capitalist courts have also sided with management,

handing down rulings that have helped CRC maintain steady production with the use of scab labour. On December 24, Regina Queen's Court Justice Janet McMurtry ruled in favour of management's request for an injunction against the pickets that effectively bars any and all attempts to delay traffic in and out of the refinery complex. Her ruling was in line with a previous interim injunction she had issued the week before, only even more blatantly pro-company than the first.

The NDP's silence on CRC's scabbing operation comes as no surprise. Between 1991 and 2007, Unifor's predecessors—the Canadian Auto Workers and the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union—supported a pro-big business New Democratic Party government in Saskatchewan that refused to legislate anti-scab legislation. Even as NDP governments pushed through budgets that slashed education and health spending, pursued privatization and passed strike-breaking legislation against nurses, the unions continued to give them their unstinting support. According to the last public filing, Unifor was the largest single financial contributor to the NDP in 2018.

Meili has since advocated ending both corporate and union donations to political parties on the claim that this will end the power of "big money" in politics. In fact, as the CRC lockout has demonstrated, the entire political and legal system is rigged to uphold the interests of big business.

Refinery workers have continued their determined struggle on the picket lines, braving even minus 40 degree temperatures over the past week. However, the lines of fuel trucks still move through the plant gates as helicopters loaded with scabs and managers pass overhead.

CRC, a subsidiary of Federated Cooperatives Limited (FCL), is a highly profitable company that is determined to decimate benefits and pension plans throughout its extensive operations in western Canada.

In the last contract, Unifor opened the door to further pension attacks when it agreed to a two-tier benefits system at the Regina refinery. Last year, after a bitter five month strike against the FCL-affiliated Saskatoon Co-op, the United Food and Commercial Workers union also recommended to its membership a two-tier system that was just narrowly ratified by the striking workers.

In order to maintain a modicum of credibility amongst their membership, union officials have mounted several initiatives, including a call for consumers to boycott Co-op gas stations and shops. Recently, the union has organized three brief blockades of Co-op automated cardlock gas bars. At the same time, Unifor has bowed to the pro-company injunction imposed by the court without a fight, pledging to abide by its reactionary provisions.

The union has also called on its 315,000 members to send “solidarity delegations” to the refinery gates. This radical-sounding rhetoric, which commits Unifor to precisely nothing, reflects the growing fear among the bureaucracy’s leadership that workers are losing confidence in the union and may seek to initiate a struggle independently of the bureaucracy’s control. A similar development has been witnessed in neighbouring Alberta, where public sector union leaders, faced with overwhelming opposition to the United Conservative Party government’s brutal austerity measures, recently felt compelled to issue bombastic “warnings” to the government about a possible “general strike.”

The cynical character of such claims is demonstrated by the fact that in the face of a massive, cross-Canada corporate-state assault on workers’ rights and public services, the unions are doing everything in their power to divide workers and stifle and strangle their struggles. This goes hand in hand with their efforts to politically tie workers to nominally “progressive” parties like the NDP and Justin Trudeau’s Liberals that enforce the diktats of big business.

CRC was no doubt emboldened by Unifor’s insistence that the Regina refinery workers should do nothing last September, when management tasked them with training the scabs who would replace them in the event of a strike or lockout; and by the union’s surrender to the Saskatchewan Party government’s demand for real wage cuts at the conclusion of last fall’s strikes by 5,000 provincial Crown Corporation workers.

The Ontario Federation of Labour has failed to even call a demonstration to protest the Ford government law that imposes three years of real wage cuts on 1 million provincial public sector workers. Ontario’s 200,000 teachers are determined to resist the government’s sweeping education spending cuts and plans to dramatically increase class sizes in higher grades; yet the unions are doing everything to frustrate their struggle. Each of the four teacher unions is acting on its own and limiting job action to token one-day strikes organized on a regional basis. Most tellingly of all, the unions are silent on the government’s plans to criminalize teacher job action and impose concessionary contracts by fiat.

Workers must face some hard truths. Firstly, the pro-capitalist unions are led by a privileged bureaucracy whose interests are antagonistic to the workers they purport to represent. Rather than serving as organizations of worker struggle, the unions have increasingly integrated themselves into management and imposed concessions and job cuts.

Secondly, and no less importantly, CRC workers are not merely in a conflict with a particularly ruthless employer, but with the entire austerity agenda of the ruling class. Across Canada, governments of all political stripes are enforcing public spending cuts and gutting workers’ rights.

Even the most immediate demands of the CRC workers raise the need for a political struggle against the entire establishment. If the workers are to beat back the company’s demands and end the lockout on their terms, they must stop all trucks in and out of the facility. But doing so would bring them into direct conflict not just with the company, but with the courts, police and the provincial government. Scott Moe’s Saskatchewan Party has in turn been embraced by Justin Trudeau’s federal Liberals for allegedly representing “western interests,” with Trudeau pledging to cooperate closely with it. As for the NDP, its total silence during the more than six weeks of lockout confirms that it too is utterly beholden to the corporate elite.

In order to ensure victory, CRC workers must take the conduct of their struggle into their own hands by forming action committees independently of and in opposition to the Unifor bureaucracy and the union’s political allies in the NDP. These committees must broaden the struggle to energy workers across Canada, public servants, teachers, nurses and manufacturing workers, all of whom confront the same attacks on their wages, job security and workplace benefits.

The struggle against CRC, its pension cuts and scabbing operation must become the spearhead of a working class counteroffensive against all concessions, the dismantling of public services, and the criminalization of workers struggles, and aimed at bringing to power a workers government committed to breaking the power of big business and reorganizing socioeconomic life in the interests of working people.



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