

While workers confront police violence and pro-company court injunctions,

## Unifor prepares betrayal in Saskatchewan refinery lockout

Carl Bronski  
25 January 2020

Using a phony, largely scripted “blockade” of the Co-op Refinery Complex (CRC) in Regina, Saskatchewan as a diversionary backdrop, Unifor has moved to end the bitter, seven-week-long lockout of 750 oil refinery workers on terms wholly or largely dictated by management.

Unifor President Jerry Dias convened a press conference Thursday morning to declare that the union was, in accordance with CRC’s demands, dropping all “preconditions” concerning the maintenance of the workers’ defined-benefits pension plan. Emphasizing that the union is now ready to “dramatically alter” its bargaining stance, Dias pleaded for the company return to the bargaining table.

“We communicated with them (refinery management) on Tuesday night” said Dias, “that the preconditions that we had put on the bargaining table, we were now prepared to remove and dramatically alter.”

This abject climb-down comes after several days of frenetic activity at the gates of the Co-op Refinery Complex, a subsidiary of the highly profitable Federated Co-operatives Ltd, which once again saw the Regina police acting as enforcers for CRC management.

Prior to this week’s events, refinery management had maintained close to full production since imposing the lockout, through a massive scabbing operation that involved the creation of an operational camp inside the facility and the daily helicoptering in and out of management personnel, supplies and new crews of scabs.

Early in the lockout, two anti-worker court injunctions outlawed any picketing that would significantly impede the steady stream of oil tanker trucks that has moved to and from the refinery with only nominal hindrance.

With Unifor appearing helpless in the face of the court injunctions and the unfettered scabbing operation, Dias along with a phalanx of full-time union officials flew to Regina on Monday and set-up a blockade of the refinery,

stopping the movement of all fuel trucks. Late Monday night, fifty police attacked the blockade, manhandling picketers including elderly supporters, one of whom had to be hospitalized. Fourteen union officials, including Dias, were arrested and charged with “mischief.” Police then dismantled part of the blockade.

On Tuesday, Regina Police Chief Evan Bray denounced the picketers as “having no vested interest in our community,” characterized the dispute as taking the city “hostage,” and signaled that more arrests and police violence could be forthcoming.

That same day, the blockade of the refinery was restored by picketers that Unifor was at pains to insist, for fear of running afoul of the injunction, did not include any of the locked-out refinery workers. Leading officials from the Canadian Labour Congress, the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour, CUPE, OPSEU and other unions, who had remained silent since the lockout started, now began issuing perfunctory statements of “support” and booked their plane tickets for an appearance at a scheduled Wednesday plant gate rally.

Ryan Meili, provincial New Democratic Party (NDP) leader of the union-backed parliamentary opposition to right-wing premier Scott Moe, also broke his silence on the dispute, and finally and rather uncomfortably appeared at the CRC picket line. Refusing to denounce the company for the lockout or criticize the anti-worker actions of the courts and police, Meili called on the Saskatchewan Party-led government to intervene in the dispute and press for the company and union to return to the bargaining table.

In fact, the Moe government has been playing a key role, backing management’s concessions drive, since before the lockout began. In November, the provincial labour minister publicly declared the government had no objection to CRC’s “contingency plans”—i.e. its scab operation—but

stood ready to use the full legislative tools available if ever worker job action succeeded in crippling the refinery's output.

After his release from some 14-hours in police detention, Dias made a show of defiance by returning to the CRC picket line Tuesday. Then, calculating he had at least to some degree shored up the union's credentials with the locked-out oil workers, he privately informed management Tuesday evening of Unifor's pension climb-down.

The following day, a Regina court announced a \$100,000 fine against Unifor based on purported December violations of the first injunction. The company is now lobbying for additional penalties for the current blockade.

Thursday's public announcement by Dias that he has jettisoned the just demands of the membership was greeted by the company with derision. Only, insisted CRC, if Unifor unilaterally disarmed and removed the blockade of the refinery and allowed fuel trucks to again move into the complex unimpeded, would it consider re-starting negotiations. Smelling blood in the water, Co-op management is demanding that Dias now perform a full-on strip-tease, surrendering even the fig leaf of credibility that he seeks to maintain before selling out the workers' demand that the proposed gutting of their pension plan be stopped.

What are workers to make of all of this? Many have been energized by the blockade, the appearance of national labour officials at their plant gates and the fiery speeches of Dias. Saskatchewan has not seen such a bitter and internationally publicized labour dispute in generations. But in fact, Dias' manoeuvres come from the tried and true playbook of the Unifor bureaucracy. Workers in one dispute after another have learned over the years that the arrival of Unifor's "cavalry" signals a concessions-laden "kiss of death" for their rightful struggles.

Just last fall, Dias suddenly appeared at Windsor, Ontario's Nemark auto parts factory where the union had sanctioned a plant gate blockade, followed by a strike against the company's plan to end production at the facility and throw 180 workers onto the scrapheap. "We have an ironclad contract" to keep the plant open, he declared and roared that the union wasn't going anywhere. Shortly thereafter, Dias agreed to end the strike and to appeal to the Ontario Labour Relations Board—which summarily ruled that the union had accepted language in the contract allowing the company to close.

Workers in Oshawa at the shuttered GM truck plant will recall the short-lived 2008 "blockade" which proved to be but a prelude to its closure the following year. Only last year Dias was telling the 2,300 workers at Oshawa's sole remaining auto assembly plant that Unifor would never countenance its shutdown, then negotiated a plant closure

agreement.

Dias' announcement that the union at the Co-op refinery will now negotiate a defined-benefit pension plan that will invariably feature significant paycheque deductions and a regressive pension calculator formula that will slash pension benefits is of a piece with this whole history of betrayal.

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. Dias' proposal to negotiate on the company's terms in Regina must be rejected by the membership.

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 certainly stop all trucks in and out of the facility. But doing so has brought them into direct conflict not just with the company, but with the courts, police and the provincial government.

In order to ensure victory, CRC workers must take the conduct of their struggle into their own hands by forming action committees independent 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.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**