

Unifor negotiating pension cuts in Saskatchewan refinery lockout

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Yesterday, as the bitter lockout of 750 oil refinery workers in Regina, Saskatchewan, entered its ninth week, Unifor—led by its national president, Jerry Dias—and Federated Cooperative Limited (FCL) management returned to the bargaining table.

FCL agreed to the contract talks after Unifor bowed to the company's demand that it withdraw all preconditions and lift a ten-day blockade of the highly profitable Cooperative Refinery Complex (CRC), the third largest oil refinery in Western Canada.

Since the beginning of the lockout, the company, with the active support of the right-wing provincial government, has mounted a massive scabbing operation. It has maintained a work camp inside the refinery grounds and helicoptered in supplies, scabs, and managers since locking out the regular workforce last Dec. 5. In this, it has been bolstered by two pro-company court injunctions restricting picketing, a third ruling fining the union \$100,000 for contempt of court, and a police attack on the picket line that ended in the arrest of 14 picketers, including Dias, and the hospitalization of another. The union could face further court sanctions in another contempt-of-court hearing scheduled for February 4.

The central issue in the dispute is FCL's demand that the defined-benefits pension program for veteran workers be gutted. In the last contract, Unifor accepted a two-tier benefits scheme that requires all newly-hired workers to enroll in an inferior defined-contributions pension plan, but left the provisions for veteran workers untouched. During the negotiations for the current contract, the union initially insisted that the current defined-benefits plan not be altered. However, in a significant climb-down last week, Unifor withdrew that precondition.

Emphasizing that the union is now ready to

“dramatically alter” its bargaining stance, Dias pleaded for the company to return to the bargaining table. “We communicated with them (refinery management),” said Dias, “that the preconditions that we had put on the bargaining table, we were now prepared to remove and dramatically alter.”

The company responded by demanding that the union first end its blockade, which has stopped all fuel trucks from entering or leaving the complex since January 20. On Thursday, Dias announced that the union would comply with that stipulation as well.

Signaling that the union plans to present major concessions at the talks that could quickly satisfy company management, Local 594 president Kevin Bittman said Thursday, “We're hoping to get a deal at the table tomorrow. That's where this dispute is going to end.”

Should no deal be reached, Dias has called on Saskatchewan Party Premier Scott Moe to arrange for binding arbitration to end the dispute. Moe's office responded that as of Wednesday, no official request from the union had been received.

Dias' appeal to the right-wing, anti-worker Moe government must be seen by the locked out workers as part of Unifor's criminal attempts to sellout their struggle. The rigged labour arbitration process is designed to enforce employer demands and, under a fig leaf of legality, defuse workers' struggles.

Dias' suggestion that Moe and his ministers can be pressured into acting as neutral mediators is absurd on its face. 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 Moe government has also been a partisan player

throughout the dispute, 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 scabbing operation—and stood ready to use the "full legislative tools" available if ever worker job action succeeded in crippling the refinery's output.

After a long silence on the scab-herding operation in Regina, the federal New Democratic Party (NDP) announced this week that it will introduce a private members bill to outlaw the use of scabs in enterprises governed by the Canada Labour Code. About 400,000 unionized federal workers would be affected. This proposal, however, is simply meant for show.

If the minority Liberal government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau even allows the bill to reach the floor of the House of Commons, it will no doubt vote it down in a bloc with the right-wing Official Opposition Conservative Party—a fact of which the federal NDP leadership is well aware. In 2016, a majority Liberal government, joined by the Conservatives, voted down a similar anti-scab proposal by the NDP. Trudeau's Liberals also criminalized a postal workers' strike in 2018 with back-to-work legislation, and threatened to do the same last November during the CN Rail strike.

Such consistent anti-worker actions by the big business Liberals have not prevented Unifor from actively supporting the party during elections and giving pride of place to Liberal leaders at their conventions. Nor has it stopped the NDP's efforts to find "common ground" with Trudeau in the new parliament, where the minority Liberal government is reliant on support from the opposition parties to pass legislation.

In Saskatchewan, the NDP, the official opposition in the provincial legislature, maintained a criminal silence on the refinery dispute until recently. It has refused to join the federal NDP in making a nominal commitment to adopt anti-scab legislation. Instead, the party meekly announced that it would engage in consultations on the effects of employing scabs in the province. Workers should not hold their breath.

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 steadfastly 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.

In order to prepare the fight against the rotten contract that Unifor is now seeking to conclude, the CRC workers must take the conduct of their struggle into their own hands by organizing independently of, and in opposition, to the trade union bureaucracy.

Above all, they must recognize that their fight against FCL is not merely a collective bargaining dispute with a single, ruthless employer, but a political fight against the capitalist state and all its institutions. This political struggle demands that workers recognize they face the combined opposition of the right-wing provincial government, which backs the company's demands, the police and courts, which act as enforcers for FCL, the NDP, which refuses to stand up for workers' rights while extending a hand of cooperation to the pro-war, pro-austerity federal Liberals, and Unifor and the entire union bureaucracy, which has systematically suppressed all working class struggles for the past four decades.

While workers have powerful enemies, their allies are stronger still. Working people across Canada and internationally are being driven into struggle by the same attacks on wages, pensions, and living conditions that have motivated the Regina refinery workers to show tremendous determination and a readiness to fight during the two-month lockout. If locked out workers are to prevail, they must fight to make their struggle the spearhead of a working class counter-offensive against the ruling elite's austerity drive and for a workers' government committed to socialist policies.



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