

Unifor offers sweeping concessions to FCL management in failed bid to end Regina oil refinery lockout

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Management at Federated Cooperatives Limited (FCL) in Regina, Saskatchewan, summarily dismissed a rotten concessions offer made by Unifor negotiators Friday night aimed at ending a lockout of around 750 oil refinery workers now in its ninth week.

A clearly shaken Scott Doherty, the union's lead negotiator and executive assistant to Unifor's national president Jerry Dias, appeared at the refinery gates shortly after the talks collapsed to announce that a blockade of the plant would be immediately reinstated. The union had lifted its 11-day blockade earlier that day as a condition demanded by the company if it was to return to the bargaining table.

As the company stalled and stone-walled throughout most of Friday's talks, refinery managers took advantage of the lifted blockade to push through several large trucks carrying food and other supplies to restock the sprawling scab camp inside the facility, and lined up a steady stream of tankers to move its processed fuel out of the plant. "The labour movement got played," Doherty said later to reporters.

Doherty's comment is disingenuous and aimed at concealing Unifor's desperate efforts to sell out the workers' struggle. With their despicable capitulation to management's outrageous demands to restart contract talks, and their acceptance of sweeping concessions, Dias, Doherty and their fellow union bureaucrats consciously played directly into the hands of the company, which responded with predictable ruthlessness. It was not "the labour movement" that got played, but rather the corrupt Unifor bureaucracy, which connived with management to pull the wool over the eyes of the locked-out workers and pave the way for Unifor to sabotage the struggle against pension cuts.

FCL is a highly profitable company, earning a

whopping \$3 million per day from its Regina Co-op refinery. To further line the pockets of its executives and its network of co-op stake-holders and to gain an edge on its competitors, this ruthless and arrogant company has committed to smashing the resistance of its workforce.

The dispute, which centers around FCL's demand that the defined benefits pension plan be gutted, has pitted the courageous and determined refinery workers against a massive scabbing operation mounted by FCL, court injunctions restricting picketing, a \$100,000 court imposed fine on the union and a police attack on the blockade resulting in the arrest of 14 picketers, including national president Dias. A second contempt of court hearing is scheduled for February 4. Picketing injunctions are also being sought by the company at its blockaded fuel distribution depots in Carseland, Alberta and Winnipeg, Manitoba.

In addition, the workers face the right-wing government of Premier Scott Moe, which has backed FCL to the hilt throughout the lockout, including by green-lighting its scabbing operation.

At the Friday negotiations, the union bargaining team twice offered new concessions. As Doherty explained in a Facebook video, Unifor negotiators suggested that workers could pay a 6 percent payroll deduction to help fund their own pension, an unprecedented measure. They also agreed, with the aid of the Moe government, to weaken the provincial Pension Solvency law to benefit FCL. All told, the concessions amounted to a \$20 million windfall per year for the company.

The union's miserable climb-down merely emboldened FCL management. As the company rejected the union's proposals out of hand, it also tabled new demands for the reduction in the number of process operators and maintenance staff. The talks ended without agreement.

Such was the depth of the capitulations by the bargaining team that at a press conference the following day, Doherty remarked that local president “Kevin (Bittman) and I might get beaten up later when we tell them (the members) that we gave the company six percent.”

FCL has taken the measure of the union bureaucrats since the beginning of this round of bargaining and, indeed, since the last contract three years ago. In that deal, Unifor opened the door for the current attack on pensions by agreeing to a two-tier system that forces all new hires onto an inferior defined contributions scheme.

In the run-up to the December 5 lockout, Unifor conceded a scheme whereby the union would assist the company in seeking ways to move veteran workers from their defined benefits program to the defined contributions plan. Then, last week it sent a letter to the company agreeing to its demand that the union withdraw “preconditions” prohibiting negotiating reductions in the defined benefits program. But this was not enough for FCL. It then demanded that the union lift its blockade before any talks could begin. Unifor agreed.

After the first overtures by the union to management last week, the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote, “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.” Not satisfied with the “strip-tease,” FCL is now demanding that Dias run naked through the snow. Dias will eventually oblige unless the locked-out rank-and-file now take control of their struggle out of the hands of the conniving union leadership.

Already, in response to Friday night’s events, Dias and Doherty sent a letter Saturday to Premier Moe calling for binding arbitration and for Moe to “wake up and show some leadership.” 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 sell out their struggle. The rigged labour arbitration process is designed to enforce employer demands and, aided by a bit of Dias’ trademark rhetorical bluster, 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.

But the struggle can still be won. In order to prepare the

fight against whatever rotten contract that Unifor and FCL seek to conclude, Regina refinery workers must take the conduct of their struggle into their own hands by organizing independently of, and in opposition, to the trade union bureaucracy.

The fight against FCL is not merely a collective bargaining dispute with a single, ruthless employer, but a political fight against the government and all its institutions. This political struggle demands that workers recognize they face the combined opposition of the right-wing provincial government, the police and courts, which act as enforcers for FCL, the NDP, which refuses to stand up for workers’ rights, 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. Appeals must be made to the 5,000 Unifor members in the Saskatchewan Crown Corporations to join in a strike against the Moe government. Energy, rail and industrial workers must join this action. The “solidarity” of union bureaucrats who fly into town for a day for a photo-op on the picket line and soon scurry back to their warm offices is wearing thin.

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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