

Unifor praises Saskatchewan premier as he demands police action against locked out refinery workers

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Saskatchewan Party Premier Scott Moe has amplified his government's staunch support for the scab operation Federated Cooperatives Ltd. (FCL) has mounted—with the full backing of the police and courts—for the past nine weeks against 750 locked-out workers at its Regina oil refinery.

In a speech delivered Monday to businessmen at the Urban Municipalities Association, Moe railed against the locked-out workers for “flagrantly breaking the law,” and said police must be ready to take action, i.e., to unleash violence, to ensure FCL's scabbing operation can proceed unimpeded.

In response to pleas from Unifor that he “intervene” in the dispute, Moe said he was prepared to name a “special mediator,” but only if the union “ceases all illegal activity immediately.” “This includes,” he continued, “removing unlawful barricades that are erected at the refinery.” Moe was referring to the blockade Unifor has maintained at FCL's Co-op Refinery Complex since January 20.

Saskatchewan's right-wing premier could hardly have spelled out his support for the highly profitable FCL, its demands for sweeping concessions, and its scabbing operation more bluntly. Whether the union accepted his condition for naming a special mediator or not, the state, he vowed, would ensure pickets could not impede FCL's operations.

“If the government's offer is turned down,” asserted Moe, “it is my expectation that the Regina Police Service will uphold the law, they will enforce the court order and they will remove the barricades at the refinery.”

The premier's statements are a damning indictment of the politics of Unifor and the New Democratic Party. They have been publicly pleading for Moe to “wake up” and “intervene” in the dispute. In truth, Moe's government has been playing a central role in the lockout

from the outset. It green-lighted FCL's scabbing operation, announcing in November that it had no objection to the company's “contingency plans” and would only intervene if worker job action threatened CRC's output.

FCL management, for its part, has explicitly praised Moe for his involvement in the lockout. Revealing perhaps more than he intended, company Executive Vice President Vic Huard said FCL has had several “great conversations” with the provincial government about its strategy.

The company has also been backed to the hilt by the police and capitalist courts. The latter have issued a series of draconian injunctions prohibiting the locked out workers from stopping traffic into the plant, and fined Unifor \$100,000 for contempt of court for violating their pro-company orders.

Police have shepherded scabs and oil-tanker trucks across the locked-out workers' picket lines. On January 20, police responded to the erection of the blockade by Unifor officials, many of them flown in from outside the province, with a violent picket line attack, arresting 14 people and hospitalizing another.

A further violent police crackdown could come as early as today, especially if the courts, acting on FCL's request and in line with Moe's wishes, broaden the application of their previous pro-company injunctions to explicitly declare Unifor's barricade illegal.

The union has argued that the injunction currently in force only applies to the locked-out members of Unifor Local 594, and that the barricade was erected and is being manned by Unifor members not employed at the refinery.

Moe's anti-worker tirade has already emboldened the police in their attacks on the locked-out workers and their supporters. On Tuesday, cops began ticketing the vehicles

of picketing workers parked near the FCL facility, charging each worker \$75. Then, at around 1 a.m. Wednesday morning, police detained four Unifor Local 594 members who were peacefully picketing, according to a union report.

Following Moe's Monday speech, the Regina Police Service (RPS) issued a carefully-worded statement in which it noted that the police must remain "independent of elected officials," and urged that the dispute over the Unifor barricade be resolved through the use of "civil remedies"—i.e., by reference to the courts.

Clearly the police feared that if they were seen to be acting on Moe's orders and before the courts had explicitly ordered the blockade removed, they could encounter strong resistance and that the wanton police violence might backfire by rallying further support for the locked-out refinery workers.

However, the RPS statement also made clear that once given a clear directive from the courts they will move against the workers. It declared today's contempt of court hearing the "appropriate mechanism for ending the blockade."

For its part, Unifor has insisted that it is doing nothing unlawful and that it will adhere to whatever the courts decide, as it has done in the past, including by instructing the locked-out oil CRC workers to abide by the injunction forbidding them from impeding traffic in and out of the facility.

The bitter reality that must be faced by the FCL/CRC workers and their supporters is that Unifor's barricade has always been a maneuver aimed at reaching a settlement largely, if not wholly, on the company's terms, and that if they are to prevail they must take independent action to mobilize the industrial and political power of the working class.

The day after the blockade began, Unifor National President Jerry Dias informed FCL management the union was dropping its opposition to changes to the workers' defined-benefit pension plan. Two days later, Dias publicly declared the union had "dramatically alter(ed)" its bargaining stance.

Last Friday, the union bowed before company demands that it lift the then 11-day blockade as a condition for FCL to return to the bargaining table.

As the company stalled and stonewalled during 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.

After FCL torpedoed the talks Friday evening, Dias' executive assistant Scott Doherty admitted that the unions had offered the company massive concessions, which would have boosted its bottom line by \$20 million per year. This included a commitment that workers would pay 6 percent in pension contributions.

In the wake of this debacle, Unifor stepped up its calls for Saskatchewan's premier to "wake up" and "intervene," ignoring that Moe and his government have been working hand-in-glove with FCL throughout the dispute. Specifically, it urged Moe to impose "binding arbitration."

Underscoring Unifor's determination to shut down the CRC workers' anti-concessions struggle, Doherty praised the premier following his provocative, virulently anti-worker comments of this past Monday.

"We've asked the premier to interject himself," said Doherty, "and we welcome the fact that he's finally woken up and decided that he wants to do something about this dispute." NDP Saskatchewan leader Ryan Meili went even further, calling Moe's offer of a special mediator "the right thing."

The CRC workers have courageously defied a vicious employer that enjoys the backing of the courts, police, and Saskatchewan government. Their militant defiance wins support whenever workers in Canada or internationally are apprised of it, because the experience of workers facing employer rollback demands and, when they resist, state repression is universal.

But for this support to be mobilized the CRC workers must seize the conduct of their struggle from the hands of Unifor by establishing an action committee, independent of and in opposition to the corporatist, pro-capitalist Unifor apparatus. This committee must call on Unifor members at Saskatchewan's crown corporations, as well as energy, public sector, education, and healthcare workers across the country, all of whom confront similar attacks on their pensions, wages, and workplace benefits, to join the locked-out workers in struggle against the right-wing Moe government.



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