

At urging of provincial Moe government, police attack locked-out Saskatchewan refinery workers

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Just three days after right-wing Saskatchewan Premier Scott Moe demanded that the police intervene to break the blockade by 750 locked-out workers at the Federated Cooperatives Ltd. (FCL) refinery in Regina, police intervened last Thursday in a ruthless crackdown on pickets.

In actions reminiscent of a police state, the Regina Police Service, emboldened by Moe's vow to "enforce the law" and the Unifor union's isolation of the workers, set up a checkpoint on a public road leading to a key refinery gate late Thursday. Only fuel truckers on a pre-approved list were allowed to use the road. Locked out workers were refused entry and prohibited from their constitutional right to picket as the police organized the dismantling of a gate blockade and removed warming stations and portable toilets used by workers throughout the dispute. Dozens of fuel tanker trucks were then shepherded by police into the refinery and, throughout Friday, removed millions of liters of gasoline and diesel for distribution to FCL retail outlets.

Police remained on site after dismantling the blockade. Although they announced picketers could return over the weekend, this was only on condition that they restrict themselves to handing out "informational material" and refrain from blocking vehicles. In other words, FCL can continue to operate its scabbing operation unhindered.

The workers, who have been locked out since December 5, are fighting against the highly profitable company's attempt to destroy their current defined benefits pension program and slash unionized jobs at the facility.

Beyond Moe's full backing for the operation, the police's ability to intervene so brazenly is due to Unifor's deliberate efforts from the outset to smother the workers' opposition to the pension cuts and conclude a rotten "negotiated" deal that grants the company virtually everything it wants. Even as Moe threatened a police crackdown last week, Unifor officials sought to throw sand in the eyes of workers by applauding the hard-right premier for "waking up" and seeking to resolve the dispute by appointing a special

mediator. (See: Unifor praises Saskatchewan Premier as he demands police action against locked out refinery workers)

Alongside Unifor's pathetic pleas for Moe to impose an independent arbitrator, which would merely serve as another mechanism to impose the company's demands, Unifor President Jerry Dias stated last Wednesday that the union was cooperating with the Premier Moe behind the scenes. "We have been in and continue to be in conversation about the mediation process Premier Moe has offered, which is currently our best option to get the company back to the bargaining table and end this dispute," said Dias in a statement published just hours before the police smashed the picket line.

Dias' claim is absurd. Since the beginning of the dispute the government has made clear that it fully backs FCL's scab operation and stands ready to intervene if workers mobilize to shut down the refinery's operations.

The police action Thursday night was the culmination of a series of anti-worker interventions last week triggered by Moe's provocative comments. It began with police ticketing the automobiles of locked-out workers on picket duty and the forced removal of barriers used to block refinery gates. However, workers quickly reinforced the barriers. Then early Thursday morning, with police connivance, seven trucks ran the blockade and were able to depart with fuel deliveries. Over the course of the week, four more workers and Unifor's lead negotiator, Scott Doherty, were arrested on "mischief" charges. Nineteen peaceful picketers have now been arrested and charged, including Unifor President Jerry Dias.

In addition to receiving the full backing of Moe and the police, FCL management has also found close allies in the capitalist courts. Various injunctions have already imposed outrageous restrictions on picketing and resulted in fines against Unifor of \$100,000.

At a court hearing Thursday, FCL asked Justice Neil Robertson to fine Unifor an additional \$1 million, with

\$100,000 to be added for every future day that workers disrupt company supply lines. Lawyers also sought jail terms for the president and vice-president of the local union. No doubt aware that police actions were afoot, the judge did not render an immediate decision.

In Carseland, Alberta, Justice Glenda Campbell issued an injunction to limit picketing at FCL's main regional fuel depot. When workers refused to dismantle their blockade, Campbell, issued an enforcement order allowing the RCMP and court bailiffs to intervene and remove all barriers if the union fails to comply by the end of the weekend.

While Moe, backed by court injunctions, has thrown the full force of the capitalist state against the locked-out workers, Unifor has forced them to fight with their hands tied behind their backs. Last week's events demonstrated the utter fraud of Dias' repeated claims that the union would mobilize solidarity from its 315,000 members across the country. The reality is that such demagogic pledges, designed to appeal to the strong militancy among the refinery workers, served as a smokescreen behind which Dias and Unifor isolated the members of Local 594. After flying in a few hundred union bureaucrats from across the country to set up the blockade January 20, the union made no effort to mobilize its 5,000 members working for Saskatchewan's crown corporations, never mind the hundreds of thousands of teachers, education workers, public sector employees, health care workers, and many others facing the same assault on their working conditions across the country.

Many of the locked-out workers showed tremendous sacrifice to enforce the blockade, which managed to largely prevent oil from leaving the complex. As a result, and in conjunction with similar actions at Alberta and Manitoba distribution depots, FCL was forced to limit customer fuel purchases throughout its Western Canada network. By the end of last week, 22 of 35 Co-op gas stations in the Winnipeg area had run dry. Similar closures of fuel outlets were recorded in rural Manitoba, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan and in southern Alberta.

However, for Unifor, the blockade was from the outset a maneuver designed to dissipate worker opposition in preparation to impose a sellout deal based on management's terms. One week after its launch, Dias accepted an FCL ultimatum that he abandon any preconditions to the restart of talks, including the proviso that existing workers' defined benefits plans not be undermined. Unifor moved swiftly to dismantle the blockade and offer annual savings to the company totaling \$20 million during the first day of bargaining. Doherty, after admitting that he proposed that workers pay an unprecedented 6 percent towards their pensions, said he could well be "beaten up" once the

workers learned of his disgusting betrayal. Only after FCL dismissed Unifor's concessions and demanded more did the union belatedly reestablish the blockade, after trucks had resupplied the refinery and removed large quantities of gasoline.

Bolstered by Moe's police crackdown, FCL management is in no mood to compromise. In remarks following the court injunction in Alberta, FCL CEO Scott Banda bluntly summed up the sentiments of corporate Canada. "Until Unifor is compelled to abide by the law, they will be emboldened to act in this way in future disputes everywhere in Canada," Banda, a former candidate for leadership of the provincial New Democrats, arrogantly declared, "Blockades as a tactic to get your way – that's a challenge and a precedent we should all, as business owners and leaders of business, be very, very, concerned about. We owe it to every other business to not allow this illegal activity to set a dangerous precedent for all of them."

These statements, the brutal police repression ordered by Moe, and Unifor's subservience before the provincial government and capitalist "law and order" only underscore that refinery workers face a political struggle. If they are to prevail, they must take control of their fight to defend pensions out of the hands of the union bureaucracy by forming an independent action committee and appeal for the broadest possible support from the working class in Saskatchewan, nationally and internationally. The defence of pensions, jobs, and living conditions can only go forward through the building of a mass political movement in struggle against the Moe government's agenda of capitalist austerity, which is supported by the ruling elite, its political parties and all its state institutions, including the pro-capitalist unions.



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