

Saskatchewan: FCL refinery escalates its concession demands from 750 locked-out workers

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14 February 2020

On Wednesday, the 69th day after Federated Cooperatives Limited (FCL) locked out the 750 production workers at its Regina oil refinery, Scott Moe's right-wing Saskatchewan Party government appointed veteran labour conciliator Vince Ready to serve as "special mediator" in the bitter dispute.

Unifor, the bargaining representative for the locked-out workers, had been pressing the government to name a mediator-arbitrator with the power to impose a binding agreement if FCL and the union could not agree on a deal. However, Moe and FCL consistently rejected that proposal, calculating that far more draconian contract concessions could be extorted than those already offered up by Unifor.

Negotiations will re-start February 18 with Ready given 20 days to bring the two parties to a settlement. The lockout will continue if no agreement is reached.

Not coincidentally, the special mediator's announcement came the same day that Justice Neil Robertson imposed a whopping \$250,000 fine against the union and firmed up previous court orders to stop the launching of any future refinery blockades. The courts had already issued a series of draconian injunctions prohibiting the locked-out workers from preventing traffic entering the refinery, and previously fined Unifor \$100,000 for contempt of court for violating its pro-company orders.

Moe's government has acted throughout the dispute as a close ally of FCL, supporting the company's deployment of a massive scabbing operation whilst railing against the "unlawful" blockades set up by the locked-out workers and their supporters. Moe's denunciations of the determined workers struggle and his urging of the police to take decisive action led last

week to police dismantling a blockade at the Regina refinery, barring workers from even token picketing activity for several days and shepherding a steady stream of fuel trucks into the facility in order to re-supply dried-up FCL-owned Co-op gas stations across western Canada.

All of this, however, did not prevent local union President Kevin Bittman from praising Moe. "I applaud the government's decision in appointing the special mediator. We hope that he can help us in getting a settlement," said Bittman. "I also applaud the government's leadership in showing that they understand the impact this lockout has had on Saskatchewan and the city of Regina."

The premier's actions are a damning indictment of the politics of Unifor and the union-backed New Democratic Party which, while in power, refused to pass anti-scab legislation and does not endorse it even today. They have been publicly pleading for Moe to "wake up" and "intervene" in the dispute. As would be expected from the hard-right premier, all Moe's "interventions" have been aimed at strengthening FCL in its drive to force massive concessions down the throats of its workforce.

Emboldened by Unifor's repeated climb-downs, the company has escalated its concession demands, both reviving demands it had previously withdrawn and tabling new ones.

When the parties last met on January 30, Unifor offered FCL \$20 million per year in pension give-backs. So steep were the concessions proposed by Unifor, lead negotiator Scott Doherty said he feared being "beaten up" by rank-and-file workers. In the last contract, the union opened the door to the current

contract fight by bowing to an inferior two-tier pension plan for all new hires.

FCL's demands amount to a virtual shredding of the previous contract. It is demanding that it be able to remove 40 percent of all union positions currently at the refinery, including 26 master operator positions. Unionized master operators currently have the power (and knowledge) to decline unsafe orders in the highly dangerous refinery. Under the company's proposal, new payroll deductions for workers in the defined-benefit pension plan would reduce annual wages by \$11,440; inflation-indexing of pensions would be ended; and the company's pension solvency responsibilities would be weakened. FCL also wants to lower premiums for attaining higher professional qualifications; introduce cross-crafting provisions that would lead to the de-skilling of the workforce and undermine occupational safety; scrap a savings plan benefit; and gut a domestic battery program.

The refinery workers' anti-concessions struggle is a watershed event that will impact class relations across the country. Should FCL prevail, the concessions at the Regina refinery, the third largest in Western Canada, will be used as a bludgeon in the next National Energy Pattern Agreement that covers 8,500 workers across the country. But it has ramifications even beyond this.

In an extraordinary press conference held outside a previously blockaded FCL depot in Carseland, Alberta last week, company CEO Scott Banda, flanked by "independent" owner-operator truckers who are affiliated with the anti-immigrant, far-right "United We Roll" movement, told reporters that his company is fighting on behalf of big business as a whole. "Until Unifor is compelled to abide by the law, they will be emboldened to act in this way in future disputes everywhere in Canada," said Banda. "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."

Banda, earlier a leader of the provincial youth wing of the NDP and a candidate in 2001 to replace Roy Romanow as party leader and Saskatchewan premier, is working hand in glove with the Saskatchewan Party government to smash all worker resistance to his company's sweeping concession demands. He has also

taken to stoking western regional sentiment, and, in his collaboration with the Western and Alberta First "United We Roll," gone even further than Conservative leader Andrew Scheer and Alberta Premier Kenney in cultivating far-right forces.

Backed to the hilt by the government, police and courts, and with fuel now flowing again across the west and some 500 scabs firmly ensconced inside the refinery, Banda fully expects to "teach" his workforce—and workers across the country—a lesson that they won't soon forget.

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

Unifor President Jerry Dias has insisted throughout the lockout that the dispute can only be settled at the bargaining table. But from the outset, FCL has depended on the full powers of the state apparatus to pursue its attack on workers. Steeped in a nationalist-corporatist perspective, exemplified by its close ties to the big business Liberal government in Ottawa and the pro-corporate NDP in Saskatchewan, Unifor is adamantly opposed to mobilizing the working class in a political counter-offensive, including broad sympathy strike action, in defiance of the Moe government, the police and the courts.

In order to pursue victory, the Regina refinery 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. 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 pension benefits.



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