

Ontario teachers, locked out Regina refinery workers must wage a working-class political struggle

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In the four months since Canada's October 21st federal election, the class struggle has escalated markedly.

Of pivotal importance are the struggles of 200,000 Ontario teachers and school support staff, who have launched rotating regional and province-wide walkouts to oppose the Ford Conservative government's savage education cuts; and the resistance of 750 locked-out workers at the Federated Cooperatives Ltd. (FCL) oil refinery in Regina, Saskatchewan, are mounting to management's demand for massive pension cuts and other draconian rollbacks.

These militant struggles are part of a global upsurge of the working class. Mass protests and strikes have erupted around the world, from Chile, Ecuador, France and India to Mexico and the United States. They also coincide with a further sharp shift to the right of Canada's capitalist ruling elite.

To prevail in the struggle to defend their jobs, wages and social rights, workers must recognize they are facing not simply an especially ruthless employer or right-wing government, but a class-war assault and a political struggle. Locked in a global struggle for markets, profits and strategic advantage with its capitalist rivals, Canadian big business is determined to increase worker-exploitation and austerity and fund a vast rearmament program to prepare for increased overseas aggression and war.

The unions and NDP hailed the re-election of the Trudeau Liberal government last October, claiming it could be the instrument of "progressive" reform. In reality, it has intensified the right-wing policies it pursued during its first term behind a din of hollow, identity-politics laden "progressive" rhetoric.

The Liberals have strengthened Canadian imperialism's military-strategic partnership with the United States, including by endorsing Trump's illegal assassination of Iranian General Qassem Suleimani, and by prioritizing adoption of his US-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA). The latter reconfigures NAFTA to make it a more effective trade-war bloc against China and the other overseas rivals of North American capital.

In the name of advancing "national unity," Trudeau's Liberals have embraced the hard-right provincial governments in Ontario, Alberta, Quebec and Saskatchewan, politically strengthening and encouraging them as they mount a frontal assault on public services and the wages and jobs of the workers who administer them.

The Ontario and Quebec governments have vowed to impose years of further real wage cuts on public sector workers. Alberta United Conservative Premier Jason Kenney is demanding wage rollbacks of up to 5 percent from 170,000 public sector workers. This is part of his

government's plans to make the province's corporate tax rate the lowest in the country and to slash per capita provincial spending by well over 10 percent by 2023.

The criminalization of working-class opposition

To impose austerity and shred workers' rights, the political representatives of big business are using state repression—anti-strike laws, court injunctions and police violence—and cultivating far-right forces.

The Ford government has already passed legislation (Bill 124) limiting wage and benefit increases for a million public sector workers to 1 percent per year for the next three years, and it has repeatedly threatened to criminalize all teacher job action. The Kenney government has tabled legislation empowering it to hire scabs to provide "essential services" in the event of a government workers' strike. It has also mused about invoking the Canadian constitution's "notwithstanding clause" to impose wage-cutting contracts by decree.

The Scott Moe-led Saskatchewan Party government, the police and the courts have all served as FCL's handmaidens in its deployment of scabs against the locked-out Regina refinery workers.

Before the lockout even began, the Moe government publicly gave its stamp of approval to FCL's "contingency plans," adding that it would intervene with its "tool-box of legislative options" only if the workers succeeded in shutting the refinery down. The police have herded scabs and oil trucks into the refinery, while the courts have outlawed all effective picketing, and imposed hundreds of thousands of dollars in fines. After Unifor established a blockade of the plant, Moe demanded the police intervene forthwith to uphold "the rule of law." Just three days later, police attacked the workers and dismantled the barricade.

As auxiliaries in its scabbing operation, FCL boss Scott Banda has mobilized the far-right, anti-immigrant United We Roll group. This too is part of a pattern. Quebec CAQ Premier Francois Legault, who has railed against the "high wages of industrial workers and openly backed Alcoa in extorting concessions from the ABI aluminum smelter workers, recently pushed through a chauvinist law (Bill 21) that attacks the rights of Muslims and other religious minorities, so as to promote reaction and divide the working class.

While the ruling class presses ahead with a coordinated, carefully-

worked out offensive to gut wages, cut jobs and dismantle and privatize public services, the trade unions and their NDP allies are doing everything in their power to divide and demobilize the working class.

Each of the four Ontario teachers' unions is pursuing its own separate strategy for bargaining and job action. There is mass popular opposition to the Ford government and support for the teachers. However, the unions are adamant that the struggle must be confined within the straitjacket of a collective bargaining struggle—that is, it must not be waged as a political struggle that seeks to mobilize the working class to defeat the Ford government and its austerity agenda.

No appeal has been made to health care and other workers targeted by the government's budget cuts and Bill 124 for a common struggle. Most tellingly of all, the unions are conspicuously silent on the Ford government's plans to criminalize teacher job action. This is an unmistakable sign that they intend to use a back-to-work law to short-circuit the struggle.

As for the Ontario Federation of Labour, now led by former Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF) official Patty Coates, it has systematically suppressed opposition to the Ford government. The political purpose of its bogus "Power of Many" anti-Ford campaign is summed up by the countdown clock on the front page of the OFL website. It informs visitors that they should wait a little over two years to elect a "progressive government," i.e., a right-wing, pro-austerity government led by the Liberals or NDP.

Unifor has responded to the FCL-state attack with a unilateral surrender, offering the company \$20 million per year in annual concessions. Initially many rank-and-file workers welcomed Unifor's barricade as the start of a genuine mobilization of working-class power. But within hours of it being established, Unifor National President Jerry Dias was privately signaling to FCL that the union was ready to sign a contract effectively dictated by the company.

Then when management escalated its concession demands, Unifor begged for the big business henchman Moe to "intervene" in the dispute—no matter that his government has been supporting FCL and its scab operation from the get-go.

Workers need new organizations of struggle

For decades the unions have systematically suppressed the class struggle, imposing concessions and job cuts, enforcing anti-strike laws and dividing workers in Canada from their class brothers and sisters in the US, Mexico and internationally with noxious campaigns to defend "Canadian jobs."

Nationalist and pro-capitalist organizations, the unions proved incapable of providing any progressive response to the globalization of production and the ability of transnational corporations to shift production wherever profits are the highest. Instead the bureaucrats who staff these organizations have sought to defend their privileges by integrating themselves ever more fully into management and the state.

This is as true of Unifor, the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) and the Quebec-based Confederation of National Trade Unions as it is of the unions in the US, where just 6 percent of private sector workers are unionized; of France, where the unions are financially dependent on subsidies paid by the employers and state; and Germany, where in the name of "co-management" the unions organize corporate

restructurings that slash wages and jobs wholesale.

If the Ontario teachers and FCL workers' struggles are not to be sabotaged and strangled, workers must take their leadership out of the hands of the union apparatuses and make them the spearhead of a working-class counteroffensive against austerity, concessions, rearmament and war, and for a workers' government.

This requires the building of new organizations of working class struggle. Action committees must be organized independent of, and in opposition to, the union apparatuses. Such committees will be tasked with broadening every struggle to mobilize ever wider sections of working people and prepare defiance of anti-strike laws and injunctions through mass mobilizations, including general strike action.

The struggle against austerity and war is a struggle against capitalism and therefore can only be waged as a global struggle. Workers in Canada must unify their struggles with those of their class brothers and sisters in the US, Mexico and around the world, and forge themselves into an independent political force in opposition to all the parties of the ruling elite, including the NDP.

A key element in the union and NDP's suppression of the class struggle over the past two decades has been their burgeoning alliance with the Liberal Party, long the Canadian capitalist elite's preferred party of government. At their respective national conventions last summer, both Unifor and the Canadian Teachers' Federation provided Trudeau with a platform to kick off the Liberals' re-election campaign. Both before and after the election, the NDP's Jagmeet Singh pleaded to join a Liberal-led coalition government, and with full-throated union support the NDP continues to offer and provide parliamentary backing to the pro-austerity, pro-war Trudeau government.

The union and NDP leaders justify their collusion with the Liberals by arguing that the Conservatives and the right must be stopped. In reality the parliamentary system is a fraud. All five parties—the NDP, Greens, Bloc Quebecois, Liberals and Conservatives—are beholden to big business and instruments for suppressing the working class. The competition between them is merely a way of resolving disputes between various factions of the ruling elite, and, most importantly, of manipulating, diverting and defusing working class opposition.

By politically straitjacketing the working class to the Liberals and to the entire parliamentary charade, the unions and NDP enable the ruling class to press forward with its class war agenda, while giving succor to the most right-wing forces.

To fight for workers' power and the reorganization of socioeconomic life so that social need, not investor profit, will prevail, workers must build their own party based on a revolutionary socialist and internationalist program. We urge all workers and youth who want to fight for socialism to make the Socialist Equality Party that party.



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