

Toronto: CUPE seeks to impose sellout contract on 5,000 city outside workers

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In an eleventh-hour backroom deal, Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 416, the bargaining agent for more than 5,000 City of Toronto outside workers, reached a sellout contract with the country's largest municipal government last Friday.

That this tentative five-year agreement will cede still further concessions, including on job security, is clear from the fact that CUPE is refusing to divulge any details of the proposed contract prior to today's ratification meetings.

Outdoor city workers are responsible for a wide range of services in the Toronto area, including parks and recreation, waste removal, and sanitation.

Throughout the negotiation process, CUPE has worked to thwart a struggle by outside workers in defence of their jobs and working conditions.

City workers have been without a contract since December 31 of last year. Yet after filing a no board report with the Labour Relations Board last month, which put the workers in a legal strike position as of 12:01 AM Thursday, the union refused to call out the workers. Instead it extended talks by two days, then concluded a tentative agreement that has been lauded by Toronto's right-wing mayor, former Ontario Progressive Conservative leader John Tory.

At a press conference Saturday, Tory praised CUPE as "partners," and boasted the agreement "meets the goals of the city."

As in previous negotiations, CUPE has divided the outside workers from the city's 22,000 inside workers, who include office staff, early childcare providers, nurses, cleaners, and employees at city-owned event facilities. Members of CUPE Local 79, the inside workers have a strike deadline of March 14 and are confronting the same fundamental attacks on their jobs and working conditions as the outside workers.

The main areas of concern for city workers in the current contract struggle are job security, and proposed cuts to sick leave and benefits. Wages are also an issue, as both inside and outside workers have experienced four years of real-terms pay cuts in a city where the cost of living is skyrocketing due to the financial elite's speculation on the property market.

The outside workers have pressed CUPE 416 to fight for improved job security, beginning with the extension of a clause in the previous contract that protects the jobs of those with 15 years of service in the event their work is privatized. This is a very real threat, given that the city administration has already privatized garbage collection west of Yonge Street and snow clearing across the city.

The Tory administration, egged on by the *Toronto Sun* and Toronto's corporate elite and with strong behind-the-scenes support from Ontario Premier Doug Ford, has been demanding the current, extremely limited "job security" guarantee be phased out.

Additionally, the city has been pushing for cuts to health care benefits, including by cutting access to orthotics and orthopedics for dependents of city workers. It also wants to undermine sick-leave provisions by forcing workers to take a full sick-day even if they only take less than half-a-day off work.

The city's aggressive demands are aimed at gutting what little protections remain for municipal workers and paving the way for the privatization of municipal services. Mayor Tory perhaps revealed more than he intended Saturday when he remarked, "We don't have any privatization plans in particular," an indication that general planning for contracting out more public services is well under way.

Workers should reject being railroaded into yet another concessionary contract. They should insist they

given sufficient time to read the contract in full, and to debate and discuss its implications. Furthermore, they should demand the holding of an independent ratification vote overseen by rank-and-file city workers to guard against union ballot stuffing, which must be considered a real danger in light of CUPE's rotten role over the past decade in enforcing concession after concession on its members.

After selling out a six-week strike by 24,000 outdoor and indoor workers in 2009, which CUPE confined to a collective bargaining dispute and refused to unite with a strike taking place simultaneously in Windsor, Toronto's ruling elite was able to go on the offensive. In 2011, right-wing populist mayor Rob Ford, the brother of Ontario's current premier, launched a sweeping privatization agenda that saw the elimination of 300 garbage collectors' jobs as collection west of Yonge Street was contracted out. In every subsequent contract, the union has ceded further contract rollbacks for both inside and outside workers.

In 2016, CUPE agreed to a weakening of job protection when it gave up a provision entitling all full-time, permanent outside workers with 15 years seniority to job protection if their current roles were outsourced. Instead, the union agreed to close the scheme to new employees, and deny the protection to current employees who had not reached 15 years seniority by 2019. The 2016 contract also contained meager 1.25 percent annual pay "increases," which, due to inflation, translated into an annual cut in real wages.

The deal that CUPE negotiated for inside workers in 2016 was no better. It included the same real-terms pay cut and rollbacks to worker benefits, and likewise gutted the job protection guarantee.

CUPE's actions during the current round of bargaining demonstrate that the entire union bureaucracy is hell-bent on avoiding a strike that could disrupt the city and galvanize workers in the Greater Toronto Area and beyond against the assault on public services that all levels of government are enforcing.

Spearheading this assault in Ontario is the Conservative provincial government. Led by the Trump wannabe Doug Ford, this government has imposed billions in cuts to health care, education, and poverty alleviation programs, rolled back a minimum wage increase, slashed work standards and outlawed strikes

or threatened strikes by York University teaching assistants and Ontario Power Generation workers.

In the face of this onslaught, the union bureaucracy, led by the Ontario Federation of Labour, has worked tirelessly to block any genuine working class struggle and to direct workers' anger behind a get-out-the-vote campaign for the big business Liberals and New Democrats in two years' time.

Last fall, CUPE sabotaged a threatened strike by 55,000 public school support staff at the last minute, agreeing to a contract that accepted many of the Ford government's cuts and its three-year 1-percent annual cap on pay and benefit increases. The government has repeatedly touted this agreement as the benchmark for the concessions contracts its wants to impose on 200,000 other education sector workers.

CUPE's latest attempt to betray the demands of Toronto city workers takes place even as teachers across Ontario have engaged in a series of one-day strikes over the past few weeks, including a 200,000-strong province-wide walkout on Feb. 21.

The upsurge of strikes and protests across Canada in recent months shows that working people are ready to fight back against the drive of Canada's super-rich oligarchy to shred all the gains workers won in generations of struggle.

To defeat this ruthless austerity drive and develop a mass movement for workers' political power, city workers, teachers and all sections of the working class must build rank-and-file action committees in every workplace, school, and neighborhood independent of, and in opposition to, the pro-capitalist unions and their allies in the Liberal and New Democratic parties.

The authors also recommend:

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