

Canada: Locked-out Saskatchewan refinery workers reject FCL's concessions contract

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In a vote ordered by Saskatchewan's right-wing provincial government, locked-out Regina oil refinery workers have overwhelmingly rejected a concessions-filled "final" contract offer from Federated Cooperatives Limited (FCL). The 750 workers, who are members of the Unifor union, voted by 89 percent against the proposed deal.

FCL responded to the contract rejection with a terse and arrogant statement that it will continue with its massive government-backed scabbing operation, which has allowed the company to continue operating its Regina facility since the lockout began last December. "It is our hope the union membership will soon understand that the only deal that balances their requirements and also achieves long-term certainty for (FCL) is our best and final offer," declared the company.

FCL applied last month to the provincial Labour Relations Board to force a vote to end the now nearly five-month-long dispute. The proposed agreement presented by FCL would have imposed a long list of sweeping concessions on pensions, jobs and working conditions.

Prior to this, the government-appointed mediator, Vince Ready, tabled non-binding recommendations in March for a resolution of the bitter dispute that has seen FCL deploy a large scab workforce, with the unstinting support of the right-wing Saskatchewan Party government, the capitalist courts, and the police. The complicity of government agencies with FCL was further driven home to workers when health and safety inspectors gave the crowded, transitory and rudimentary scab encampment a clean bill of health in the midst of the global COVID-19 outbreak.

Ready's report granted virtually all of the company's initial concession demands. The union, which had previously proposed a series of increasingly draconian concessionary climb-downs, accepted the mediator's recommendations and scheduled a vote advising the workers to accept the rotten deal. On the weekend prior to this vote, the union, signalling its surrender, withdrew its pickets from the refinery gates. Since then, the union has not organized any picketing of the facility.

Workers, starved out on the picket line and seeing no way forward, voted 98 percent to endorse the mediator's recommendations. After the vote, local union President Kevin Bittman cynically told reporters that Ready's report, which contained everything the workers had fought against for almost four months, was "a reasonable compromise."

However, FCL then refused to accept the non-binding recommendations from mediator Vince Ready. The company cited the downturn in the oil industry due to the economic slowdown caused by the global COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing collapse of stock and oil prices to demand even deeper cuts, in particular, to its pension program. FCL then cut its refining production by 30 percent. The lockout continued. Last week, FCL sent 124 layoff notices to locked-out workers effective upon any return to work.

Fearing that an endorsement of FCL's new, "final offer" under the hammer of a forced vote by the government's Labour Board would expose its complete inability to defend its own membership, the union called for FCL's offer to be rejected. However, it did so not as part of a struggle to mobilize the working class against all concessions and the right-wing provincial government, but rather to provide political cover for yet another sordid attempt to convince the province's right-wing pro-corporate premier, Scott Moe, to intervene and end the dispute.

Following the massive "no" vote, Unifor president Jerry Dias pleaded with Moe to end the lockout on the basis of the Ready report. There is widespread popular outrage against FCL's use of the pandemic to further increase the bottom line of an already highly profitable company, but rather than mobilize this support, Dias continues to appeal to Moe and his ministers, claiming these inveterate right-wingers can be pressured into acting as neutral arbitrators.

The government, once again, rejected Unifor's appeal, insisting that the dispute was a private matter that the company and the union must settle on their own. Of course, when it came to countenancing the use of a massive scab labour force, the courts and the police to maintain

production, the Moe government showed no such “impartiality.”

For over a decade, the Saskatchewan Party government has mounted major attacks on workers’ rights and living standards, including restricting public sector workers’ right to strike through “essential services” legislation. Moe’s government green-lighted FCL’s scabbing operation before the lockout began, publicly declaring that it would only intervene if the workers succeeded in crippling the refinery’s output. In February, the premier personally exhorted the police to smash worker blockades of FCL operations.

Moe’s actions are a damning indictment of the perspective 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. Since the outset of the lockout, Unifor has insisted that the dispute be viewed as an industrial relations matter that must not go beyond traditional state-designed, pro-employer collective bargaining mechanisms. But as FCL and the Saskatchewan government have proven, the fight has, from the beginning, been a political one with all the forces of the capitalist state marshalled against the workers.

The outbreak of the pandemic has further intensified this clash of irreconcilably opposed class forces. Like FCL, companies across Canada and internationally are seizing on the economic impact of the coronavirus to impose even deeper austerity and attacks on wages on working people. Having received hundreds of billions of dollars from their hirelings in government, Canada’s corporate elite, in close collaboration with the trade unions, are preparing to reopen the economy as the pandemic continues to rage on the basis of a vast intensification of exploitation.

While Unifor begs Moe to enforce concessions on FCL workers, it is working hand-in-glove with the Big Three automakers in Ontario to open their plants as soon as possible, even though over a dozen autoworkers in the United States have died from the coronavirus.

But the dramatic changes in the economic and political situation produced by the pandemic also creates the conditions for FCL workers to mount a counter-offensive. All around the world, workers have launched strikes and protests against the criminal indifference of the ruling elite to their lives as the “back-to-work” campaign gathers pace. Amazon workers in the United States and Europe, transit workers in Canada and the US, postal workers, and meatpacking workers have all protested the lack of even the most basic safety measures in their workplaces as the number of COVID-19 infections and deaths grow.

FCL workers must unite their fight for job protection and the defence of their pension rights with this new upsurge of

working class struggles. Doing so requires a decisive political and organizational break with the Unifor bureaucracy, which is leading the locked-out workers to certain defeat.

Instead of bowing and scraping at Moe’s feet, FCL workers should form independent action committees to fight for their entirely legitimate demands and make their anti-concessions struggle the spearhead of a broader working-class challenge to the assault on workers’ social rights.

The deepening capitalist crisis has laid bare the reality that even the most immediate needs of workers, including decent pay, pensions, and workplace safety measures, can only be achieved in a political struggle that rejects the profit system and all its defenders in the NDP and trade unions. FCL and other major corporations must be transformed into publicly-owned utilities under democratic workers’ control. Only in this way can the ill-gotten gains of the super-rich be deployed to tackle the crisis produced by decades of austerity and concessions-laden contracts, and the social and economic consequences of the coronavirus pandemic.

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