

Canadian court outlaws picketing of Loblaws distribution center in Newfoundland

Dominion grocery strike

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28 October 2020

A second injunction against picketing by striking Dominion grocery store workers was handed down by the Newfoundland and Labrador Supreme Court on Monday.

The anti-democratic ruling outlaws secondary picketing of the main distribution warehouse of Dominion's parent company, the giant Loblaws supermarket chain. Workers had been blocking shipments from the facility for the past week. It followed an earlier injunction the courts issued on August 29 that ordered an end to the blocking of inventory truck shipments at Dominion store outlets.

Unifor, the union that represents the 1,400 strikers employed at the 11 Dominion stores across the province, immediately kowtowed to Monday's injunction, just as it did the previous one. This is in keeping with the role of the union bureaucracy across Canada, which prioritizes the defence of the reactionary pro-employer, state-enforced labour relations system over workers' needs and interests.

While criminalizing the one job action that was significantly impacting Dominion's operations, Justice Valerie Marshall declined Loblaws' request that she similarly order an end to informational picketing of some 50 other stores owned by Loblaws, including Shoppers Drug Mart outlets, No Frills grocery stores, and Weston Bakeries. Marshall referenced a previous ruling from the court on picket line activities that declares, "The use of the picket line, properly employed, is recognized as an important aspect of a union's labour activity and has a social utility that can't be struck down simply because it may cause minimal inconvenience or interference."

In other words, so long as workers' pickets are totally ineffectual and allow private corporations to rake in profits unhindered while starving out striking workers, they are acceptable. As soon as they pose even a limited threat to the employers' bottom line, they should immediately be outlawed.

Unifor officials nevertheless hailed Justice Marshall's decision to permit "minimal inconvenience" to the company

as a "victory." "You got to love it," said Unifor Local 597 President Carolyn Wrice. "It's given us an opportunity to say to the company, 'Look, come back. We want to get this done and over with.'"

The message here could not be clearer. Wrice, who joined the Unifor national leadership in August in recommending a sell-out deal that was overwhelmingly rejected by Dominion's low-paid workforce, is telling the company that after leaving the workers isolated on the picket lines for over two months, the union now believes it can push through a contract offer only marginally different from the last.

As Unifor celebrated its legal "victory," the authorities were using the court ruling to step up their attack on the strike. On Tuesday evening, police in St John's, the province's capital and largest city, threatened picketing workers with arrest if they failed to abandon picketing outside Weston Bakeries.

Without a contract for over a year, the Dominion workers are now entering their 10th week of strike action. Designated as essential workers, they laboured through the pandemic with totally inadequate protection from the virus, only to be forced onto the picket lines in a valiant and determined struggle against a retail giant owned by one of Canada's richest billionaires.

Workers have not received a contractual pay increase since early 2018. In 2019, management cut more than 60 full-time positions. Today, 83 percent of the Dominion workforce is made up of low-wage part-time employees with no or minimal benefits. Fully three-quarters of the workers make less than C\$15 per hour with a majority of the part-timers labouring at or just above the current provincial poverty-level minimum wage of \$12.15.

The Loblaws conglomerate is the largest retail food distributor in Canada, employing 200,000 workers. Loblaws owner Galen Weston Sr., who possesses a net worth of C\$13 billion and splits his time between luxurious residences in Ontario, Florida and the Bahamas, and his fellow oligarchs

who control Metro and Empire have nothing but contempt for their workers. This was shown by their conspiratorial decision in June to abolish the \$2 per hour COVID-19 premium paid to store clerks during the initial months of the pandemic.

The strike has won support and admiration from workers across Newfoundland. A recent radio interview with an impoverished striker garnered both sympathy and outrage throughout the province. Kim Snow, a single mother of three, a striker in Bay Roberts, broke down on the VOCM Open Line radio show with Paddy Dayly as she described her struggle to secure the necessities of life for her family.

Snow normally works 20-23 hours a week, even though she is available to work full-time. So low is her take-home pay, she usually draws a subsidy from social services to help meet her living expenses. However, by law, social services currently cannot provide that subsidy, because she is on strike. Her rent is two months overdue and her electric power is about to be disconnected. Snow sent a direct message to Loblaw oligarch Galen Weston, hoping for a “change of heart” to help out Dominion workers. It fell on deaf ears.

The desperate conditions faced by the strikers are the result not simply of the callous indifference of Weston and his ilk to their plight, but also the blind alley into which they have been led by Unifor. Although it represents tens of thousands of grocery workers across the country who confront similarly miserable working conditions, the union has done nothing to mobilize them in support of the strikers. Nor has it called on other unions, like the United Food and Commercial Workers, which also represents tens of thousands of grocery clerks, to support their fight. Instead, Unifor has isolated the militant workers on small picket lines, with the occasional visit from a national official to boost morale.

This is not a question of union incompetence, but of a deliberate policy aimed at smothering any working class movement against low wages, social inequality, and the fabulous enrichment of the super-rich like Weston. Unifor and the rest of the pro-capitalist union bureaucracy are determined to block any social opposition among working people that could disrupt its corporatist partnership with the big business federal Liberal government and the heads of corporate Canada.

The strike in Newfoundland has the potential to trigger just such a movement. It is the first grocery contract dispute in Canada since the beginning of the pandemic. Over the coming year, 2,400 other Loblaws operations across the country will see the expiration of their collective agreements. A powerful appeal from rank-and-file Dominion workers for grocery workers across the country to walk out

and join their strike would not only be met with enthusiasm by these employees, but by large sections of the working population, which has recognized the crucial service provided by grocery clerks during the pandemic.

Unifor fears such a prospect like the plague. This is why they continue to isolate the striking workers while appealing desperately to Loblaws to return to the bargaining table to cook up another sell-out that can be rammed down the workers’ throats.

If the Dominion workers’ struggle is not to end in this way, strikers must reject the collective bargaining strategy advanced by Unifor and take up a political struggle. Strikers are not merely in a conflict with a particularly ruthless employer, but with the entire austerity agenda of the ruling class. Across Canada, governments of all political stripes are slashing public spending, enforcing corporate wage-cutting, and gutting workers’ rights. Earlier this week, several thousand health care workers in Alberta walked off the job in protest at plans to privatize their jobs.

Even the most immediate demands of the grocery workers raise the need for a political struggle against the entire establishment. If the workers are to beat back the company’s demands and end the strike on their terms, they must certainly stop all trucks in and out of the Mount Pearl distribution warehouse. But doing so has brought them into direct conflict not just with the company, but with the courts, the police and the entire political establishment.

While the opponents arrayed against Dominion strikers are many, they have even more powerful allies in working people across Canada and internationally. In order to ensure victory, Dominion 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 grocery and other retail workers across Canada, teachers, health care workers, and manufacturing and transport workers, all of whom confront the same attacks on their wages, job security and workplace benefits. They must base their struggle on the conviction that decent-paying, secure jobs must be prioritized over corporate profit. This can be realized only as part of a fight for a workers’ government committed to socialist policies.



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