

Unifor sells out militant Newfoundland Dominion grocery strike

Carl Bronski
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The bitter 12-week strike of 1,400 Dominion grocery workers at 11 stores across Newfoundland ended Friday with Unifor announcing the strikers had ratified a new four-year contract. Unifor has refused to release the vote count, a clear sign that significant opposition to the sellout deal was registered.

Speaking with CBC, Chris Macdonald, assistant to Unifor President Jerry Dias, conceded, “Our members are feeling disappointed. This is not the deal that they wanted and this isn’t the reason why they went on strike.”

The new contract is virtually the same as a Unifor-endorsed tentative agreement that the workers overwhelmingly rejected last August.

Back-dated to October 2019, the new contract provides a paltry pay increase of \$1.35 spread over four years. But only full-time workers and part-timers with more than five years seniority will receive the full \$1.35. In a further insult, Dominion management “threw in” a store gift card. Most workers will receive cards worth just \$50 or \$100, with the few high seniority full-time staff receiving \$500 cards.

The Dominion workers had not received a contractual pay increase since early 2018. In early June, after just three months, the grocer eliminated a \$2.00 per hour “emergency bonus” introduced to keep workers on the job during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A major issue in the strike was the company’s years-long assault on full-time jobs. Under the new agreement, only 22 of the more than 60 full-time positions eliminated in 2019 will be restored.

When the strike began, 83 percent of the Dominion workforce was made up of low-wage part-time employees with no or minimal benefits. Fully three-quarters of the workers made less than \$14.00 per hour, with a majority of the part-timers labouring at or just

above the then provincial poverty-level minimum wage of \$11.65 (since raised by the province to \$12.15).

Dominion is one of the many holdings of the giant Loblaws conglomerate. Loblaws and its subsidiaries are Canada’s largest retailer, employing 200,000 workers. Its owner, Galen Weston Sr., has a fortune in excess of C\$13 billion.

Loblaws is raking in huge profits on the backs of its low-paid, precariously-employed workforce. It recorded a \$162 million increase in second-quarter net profits and bumped it up another 7 percent in the third quarter. Profits so far this year total nearly half a billion dollars and are expected to double by year’s end.

Given this shameless profiteering in the midst of a global health crisis and the vast wealth at Loblaws’ disposal, there is no question an appeal for job action in support of the striking Dominion workers would have won powerful support among workers across Canada—beginning with the hundreds of thousands of supermarket workers, including many at other Loblaws outlets, whose contracts have or will soon expire.

But such a working class counteroffensive was precisely what Unifor was determined to prevent. A close ally of the federal Liberal government, Dias and the Unifor apparatus have responded to the pandemic and the eruption of the greatest crisis of global capitalism since the Great Depression of the 1930s by deepening their anti-worker corporatist partnership with big business and the state.

That is why the union recommended an employer-dictated agreement last August, and why it refused to mobilize grocery workers across the country in support of the strike and a joint struggle against the retail food giants.

The well-heeled Unifor bureaucrats tried to cover their treacherous actions with a few brief and

ineffectual publicity stunts, including a never realized threat to launch a national “boycott” of Loblaws. They immediately kowtowed to the anti-worker court injunctions and police violence that was employed against the strikers after they tried to disrupt Loblaws’ Newfoundland distribution network.

Unifor is now trying to claim it had nothing to do with the strikers’ isolation and the strike’s defeat. “Ultimately,” MacDonald told CBC, “they had an employer who refused to budge ... essentially threatening many more months back on the picket line.”

The reality is that Unifor ran the strike into the ground. It softened the strikers up by isolating their struggle, then begged Loblaws to present workers essentially the same rotten offer they had voted down 12 weeks earlier.

The union exploited a reactionary court ruling to advance this agenda. When a judge ruled that it was illegal for pickets to block company shipments to and from its central warehouse, but permitted ineffectual information pickets, local Unifor president Carolyn Wrice hailed the ruling as a “victory.” “You got to love it,” she said. “It’s given us an opportunity to say to the company, ‘Look, come back. We want to get this done and over with.’” In other words, having made clear the union would order the strikers to comply with a court ruling aimed at barring all but token picketing, Wrice signalled to the company that Unifor now believed the strikers could be prevailed upon to grudgingly ratify a sellout contract.

A post from one worker revealed how the union pressured workers at her worksite to accept the company offer. Unifor official Chris MacDonald told the workers “it’s costing them around \$500,000 for us to be out on strike a week. He said that basically with a strike the end game is to get better than what we had, but the company has said right from the start they aren’t going to give us anything regarding sick days or better pay. He said that it would be different if the company was run in Newfoundland, but as far as the company is concerned we’re just a blip on their radar.”

Another Dominion worker wrote, “I thought a ratification vote happens when a union and company reach a tentative agreement. That did not happen, not even close. It seems like our union is giving up and Loblaws is getting what they want. It’s time for Unifor

to pull all union workers from Loblaws across Canada, now is the time. Don’t say it’s not legal. Loblaws don’t play fair, neither should we.”

As the *World Socialist Web Site* previously wrote in an article widely read by workers in Newfoundland and across Canada, “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 did 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 Dominion workers on small picket lines, with the occasional visit from a regional or 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 had the potential to trigger a working class upsurge. The valiant strikers had the heart-felt support of working class Newfoundlanders across the province. It was 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.

In the coming class battles, grocery workers must organize themselves into rank-and-file committees independent of the unions, so they can advance their struggle against the rapacious corporate bosses through the mobilization of the social power of the working class.



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