

# Over 900 warehouse workers in Toronto on strike at Canadian grocery chain Metro

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Over 900 distribution workers at a Toronto area Metro grocery warehouse launched strike action Saturday, April 2, for better wages, pensions, and benefits. The job action only came about because the workers courageously rebelled against the effort of Unifor, Canada's largest private sector union, to ram through a tentative agreement it had cooked up with company management that would have meant real-terms pay cuts over its four-year duration.

The warehouse, in the Toronto district of Etobicoke, supplies Metro, Food Basics and other stores across southern Ontario.

Last week, the workers, who have been without a contract since October 2021, voted by an overwhelming 99 percent to launch a strike. Unifor Local 414 took this not as a sign to organize a work stoppage, but to sabotage it. Union negotiators extended the initial strike deadline of 12:01 a.m. on April 1, then announced later that day that a tentative agreement had been reached with the employer. The deal promised a 14 percent pay increase over four years, equating to 3.5 percent per year, under conditions where inflation is running at over 6 percent.

Showing the union bureaucracy's customary contempt for the rights of the workers they claim to represent, Unifor Local 414 sought to steamroll the workers into accepting a deal whose contents they had never seen. A vote was organized within hours on the basis of carefully selected "highlights," including the carrot of a 6 percent pay rise during the contract's first year.

But Unifor's tactics backfired, as the workers turned the contract down. Underscoring the union's determination to isolate the struggle and provide as little information as possible, Unifor officials failed to disclose the percentage of workers who voted against

the deal. The union also confirmed that picket lines would only be set up at the warehouse, with no protests or other forms of solidarity action planned for Metro's stores across the province. This decision will have the effect of further isolating the strikers from the public.

Unifor has no intention of waging a struggle for the workers' entirely justified demands. Instead, it responded to the strike by pleading with the company for further talks. Chris MacDonald, assistant to the Unifor national president, said, "The members have final say on the tentative agreement and have opted to turn down this offer. Right now, we're in the process of setting up our picket lines but we will be reaching out to Metro to determine when negotiations will resume. The bargaining committee is ready to resume negotiations in the hope of bringing this strike to a speedy end."

In a press release on its website, Metro Ontario Inc. complained bitterly about the workers' decision to turn down a "fair and equitable" agreement that had received a "unanimous" recommendation from Unifor's bargaining committee. Underscoring that the tentative deal was concluded firmly on management's terms, the company described it as a deal that "meets the needs of our employees and our customers while ensuring that Metro remains competitive."

Metro Inc. has annual sales of \$18 billion and operates or services a network of 950 stores employing 90,000 people. In January, Metro reported a jump in first-quarter profits of 8.6 percent. The corporation also reported earnings of \$207.7 million, or 85 cents per share in the 12 weeks ended December 18, 2021, compared to \$191.2 million or 76 cents per share in the same period a year earlier.

CEO Eric Lafleche revealed in January how Unifor ensures that the company can compete with non-

unionized workforces at other chains. He commented, “We have good relations with our unions, and whenever bargaining is up, we negotiate as best we can while remaining competitive in our industry. We don’t operate in a vacuum. We operate against global players, most of them non-unionized by the way, and we provide, we think, good compensation with good benefits to our employees.”

Lafleche receives compensation of approximately \$4.9 million a year, while Executive VP Carmen Fortino receives \$2.1 million.

Unifor and the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), which also represents tens of thousands of grocery store workers in Canada, have worked tirelessly to sabotage workers’ struggles for improved pay and conditions throughout the pandemic.

In the fall of 2020, 1,400 Dominion Stores workers in Newfoundland struck for 12 weeks after rejecting a Unifor-backed tentative agreement. The union deliberately isolated the strikers, wearing them down to the point where they could see no other option but to accept a contract virtually identical to the one they had previously rejected. After the ratification, the union refused to release the vote count, which suggested that support for the deal was underwhelming.

Last October, after an overwhelming strike vote by Real Canadian Superstore workers in Alberta, the UFCW infamously told them, “Ironically, the point of taking a strike vote is to attempt to avoid a strike.” The union then penned a diatribe against the workers, informing them that they had no chance of winning their demands for improved wages and benefits, and wound up the dispute with a rotten sellout contract.

The points made by the *World Socialist Web Site* in an article widely read by workers in Newfoundland and across Canada during the Dominion strike apply just as forcefully to the current job action at Metro. We wrote, “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...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.”

Like the Dominion employees, Metro workers are demanding to be treated fairly after keeping the food supply chain running smoothly during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. They face a hugely profitable corporation that lavishes wealth on its executives and shareholders. And these workers are represented by the same union that seeks to quickly push through corporate-friendly contracts, which in the case of Metro workers will not even keep pace with the current rate of inflation.

To win their struggle, Metro workers must establish a rank-and-file strike committee independently of Unifor to seize control of the conduct of the strike from the union bureaucrats. This committee should advance non-negotiable demands based on what workers actually need, including a 30 percent pay increase and improved pension and benefit rights. Above all, the committee should fight to break out of the straitjacket imposed by Unifor with an appeal to the hundreds of thousands of grocery workers across Canada and tens of thousands of distribution workers in the Greater Toronto Area to join a worker-led counteroffensive to break the grip of the financial oligarchy over all aspects of social and political life, and obtain decent-paying, secure jobs for all.



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