

Unifor bullies 900 Ontario grocery warehouse workers into accepting sellout contract

Our reporters
11 April 2022

Are you a warehouse or grocery store worker at Metro or another chain? Contact the WSWS to let us know what you think about Unifor's sellout contract and your working conditions.

More than 900 full-time workers at a Toronto area warehouse that supplies supermarket chain Metro voted Friday to accept a new four-and-a-half-year contract. The deal, which brought to an end a seven-day strike, was rammed down the throats of the workers by the Unifor union at the very point where the strike was starting to have a serious impact on Metro's highly profitable operations and putting workers in a strong position to fight for their demands for wage increases and improved conditions.

The low-paid workers, who have laboured throughout the pandemic to ensure a steady supply of food and other basic necessities in Ontario's most populous region, rebelled against the Unifor bargaining committee's unanimous recommendation to support an initial agreement with the company on April 2. The four-year deal would have included a 14 percent wage "increase," i.e., a mere 3.5 percent annually under conditions where inflation is running at over 6 percent. Unifor bureaucrats sought to steamroll workers into accepting the deal by only presenting "highlights" and demanding that workers vote on it only hours after it was finalized.

Taken aback by the workers' rejection of the deal, Unifor immediately appealed to Metro to return to the bargaining table. No effort was made to mobilize support for the strikers from Unifor's thousands of grocery store workers across Canada, nor from the hundreds of thousands of workers it represents in other sectors, including the auto industry. On the contrary, Unifor worked systematically to keep the strike isolated, including by refusing to sanction any pickets or protest action at Metro stores, where strikers could have easily engaged with members of the public and explained the issues at stake in their struggle.

Despite the union's best efforts to minimize the impact of the job action, the strike rapidly impacted the supermarket

chain's operations, which includes annual sales of \$18 billion across its network of 950 stores. By the end of last week, reports were appearing in the press and on social media of a growing number of empty shelves in Metro stores across the Toronto area. Unifor and the company went into overdrive to halt the strike, announcing a new deal announced late Thursday.

Touted by Unifor as containing "significant wage gains," the deal will in fact ensure that workers experience a real-terms decline in wages throughout the life of the contract. Unifor and Metro agreed to front-load pay increases so that the union could boast about achieving an "above-inflation" pay increase of 8 percent during the first year. But over the following three-and-a-half years, workers will receive a mere 7.8 percent in wage increases, which equates to less than 2.5 percent per year. The 15.8 percent pay increase over four-and-a-half years is the same as the 14 percent over four years initially rejected by the workers. The only difference is that the prohibition of strike action contained in every collective agreement has been extended by a further six months.

The bureaucracy was clearly concerned that the second tentative agreement could also be rejected. It ordered workers to vote at 12 pm Friday, again after only seeing "highlights" from the agreement announced just hours earlier. Indicating that support for the deal was far from overwhelming, Unifor failed to report how many workers voted for it in its press release.

When *World Socialist Web Site* reporters visited the Metro workers' picket lines Friday, they found workers whose hostility towards the union bureaucracy was almost as great as towards company management. Workers told our reporters that the voting process organized by Unifor included the division of the workforce into four groups, who were escorted into the voting area separately, given a lecture by union bureaucrats about the deal, and ordered to vote on it immediately.

"We don't trust the union, we want them out," one worker told our reporters. "They've threatened us. They've

threatened me before...Everything's under the table. They're getting bonuses."

The worker continued, "Our damn chief steward went and threatened someone two days ago. That's not right. Our own union is threatening our own workers at this place."

The worker expressed his disappointment in Unifor's leadership, explaining, "We're not even talking about these guys, the union local. We're talking about the union national. They haven't come by. They just want our money."

Another worker explained that years of stagnating wages and benefits have forced workers to take on more overtime just to make ends meet. He stated that in over 40 years of working for the company, he estimates that he has completed five years of overtime.

Another worker commented about the company, "They're reporting record profits every quarter. Quarter after quarter after quarter. They spend a lot of money on these warehouse buildings." Turning to the reasons for the workers' rejection of the first tentative agreement, he added, "Guys were upset. The pension was low...We're watching them handing out multi-million bonuses to the top executives, and they're trying to nickel and dime us. So that's the tough part."

Unifor's actions at Metro are typical of an organization that is bitterly hostile to the workers it claims to represent. Whenever workers at the grocery store chains, in the auto industry, manufacturing, or transportation seek to launch a genuine struggle for improved wages, benefits, pensions, and conditions, the Unifor bureaucracy steps in to turn an overwhelming strike vote into a mandate for capitulating to the demands of big business. If, as was the case at Metro, Unifor is forced to call a strike due to a rebellion by the rank-and-file, Unifor bureaucrats work tirelessly to isolate strikers from the rest of the working class on the picket line with derisory levels of strike pay to soften up the workers and impose a rotten sellout.

This was what took place in the strike by 1,400 Dominion grocery clerks in Newfoundland in the fall of 2020. The workers, many of whom earn poverty-level wages, courageously maintained picket lines for close to three months. Unifor intentionally quarantined the job action, sending a few national bureaucrats to meet the strikers from time to time in order to give the impression that Unifor was backing them. In reality, the union was working day and night to sell out the strike. Unifor, the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), which also represents grocery workers, and the union bureaucracy more broadly rejected issuing any appeal to their millions of collective members to support the Dominion strikers. In the end, the strikers felt they had no other option but to accept an agreement that met all of the employer's demands.

The betrayal of the Metro workers' struggle and countless other strikes like it by Unifor and the union bureaucracy as a whole is not the result of mistakes by an inept union leadership. The fact of the matter is that the unions have pursued a deliberate policy for over 40 years of suppressing the class struggle, and cultivating corporatist ties with top business executives and the capitalist state. They work not to fight for the interests of working people, but to defend the privileges of the union bureaucracy, which are bound up with the defence of corporate "competitiveness" and Canadian imperialism. The lengths to which the unions are prepared to go in protecting their ties with their "partners" in corporate boardrooms and the state apparatus is underscored by the web of corruption and criminality coming to light following the sudden resignation of Unifor's disgraced former president, Jerry Dias.

Workers at Metro and throughout the food distribution and delivery sectors must draw the appropriate political lessons from the sellout of the metro strike. The workers displayed no shortage of militancy and courage with their open revolt against Unifor and waging of a seven-day strike that began to disrupt the operations of a multi-billion-dollar company. But what they lacked was their own organization fighting for their interests, and a political perspective to guide their struggle.

All workers seeking to fight for better wages, conditions, and pension rights can do so only by carrying out a decisive break from the trade unions. They must build independent rank-and-file committees at every workplace to put forward demands based on what workers actually need to work and live comfortably, not what the corporate elite claims they can afford. These committees will coordinate the development of a mass movement of the working class across Canada and internationally to end the grip held by the corporate and financial oligarchy over all aspects of social and political life, and fight for the redistribution of society's vast wealth to meet basic social needs, including decent-paying, secure jobs for all.



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