More than 15,000 construction workers on strike across Ontario

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More than 15,000 construction workers have been on strike across Ontario since last weekend. The workers, who include high-rise and low-rise residential builders, floor fitters and operating engineers for cranes and other heavy equipment, are demanding wage increases to keep pace with skyrocketing inflation.

The center of the strike is in the Greater Toronto Area, where real estate speculators and banks have made a killing in recent years from astronomical and still-rising prices for residential properties built by the strikers.

The construction companies prevailed on the Ontario government to declare construction workers "essential employees," so as to force them to work throughout the pandemic on job sites that lacked even the most elementary anti-COVID protection measures. Now they are demanding that construction workers accept below-inflation pay increases for the next three years.

Described as the largest strike in the sector for 20 years, the Ontario construction workers' job action is part of an international upsurge of the class struggle. Recent months have seen strikes by rail workers and grocery store workers in Canada, nurses in the United States and bus drivers in Britain and India, driven by soaring inflation and decades of concessions and stagnant wages. In Sri Lanka, nationwide anti-government protests over the spiralling cost of living have been accompanied by strikes involving millions of workers.

The strikers are members of the Labourers International Union of North America (LiUNA) Local 183 and International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE) Local 793. Six groups of LiUNA affiliated workers walked out Sunday, the first day they were in a legal position to strike. The operating engineers joined the strike the next day, after voting down a three-year tentative agreement recommended by the Local 793 bargaining team. Although details are scant, the engineers appear to have been offered a wage increase of just 9 percent, spread over three years. With inflation currently rising at an annual rate of 6.7 percent, its highest in 30 years, workers were all but guaranteed to suffer a huge real-wage cut under the IUOE endorsed deal.

The builders are insisting that two earlier sell-out agreements should serve as a "pattern" for the industry. In February, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers imposed a three-year deal on electricians containing an "increase" of just 8.6 percent, while ironworkers accepted a 9 percent rise with a 0.5 percent premium for Toronto in March.

While the striking construction workers are no doubt determined to fight, they are being straitjacketed by LiUNA and the IUOE within a rigged labour relations system designed to give the employers most everything they want.

Every three years, collective agreements for all 30 trades in Ontario's construction sector expire simultaneously on April 30. Provincial labour relations law stipulates that workers can only stage job action in support of their contract demands during a 45-day period beginning May 1 and ending June 15. If a negotiated settlement is not reached by mid-June, workers are forced to immediately return to work and any and all outstanding issues in dispute are sent to binding arbitration. Under this anti-democratic process workers are robbed of their legal rights to strike and bargain collectively, and their future terms of employment are dictated by a government-appointed arbitrator, who invariably sides with the employers.

Binding arbitration has become a favoured mechanism for the unions and employers to suppress

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workers' struggles across all economic sectors. In March, the Teamsters turned an overwhelming vote for strike action by 3,000 CP Rail workers into a grovelling capitulation to the demand of CP management and the federal Liberal government the dispute be resolved through binding arbitration. Not only have the CP Rail workers been stripped of any legal means of fighting for improved wages and the reversal of punishing pension cuts imposed in 2012. At CP Rail's insistence, key issues for rail workers, including a brutal scheduling regime and serious safety concerns, have been excluded from the arbitration process, thereby guaranteeing that the anti-worker status quo endures.

Earlier this week, signal operators represented by the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers were sent back to work at Toronto's Union Station after the union accepted binding arbitration to bring a sudden end to a two-week strike.

LiUNA and the IUOE are undoubtedly preparing a no less rotten betrayal of the construction workers' strikes behind the scenes. Both unions refused to lift a finger to defend their members' safety during the pandemic, including when the Doug Ford-led Progressive Conservative government classified them as "essential workers" to ensure that the profits of property developers and rich investors were not endangered during lockdowns.

LiUNA officials have regularly boasted about their role in keeping workers on the job. In a comment summing up the friendly relations that exist between the LiUNA top brass and construction management, Local 183 spokesman Jason Ottey said, "We didn't ask for pandemic pay, we do not have a work from home option, and as a result, we thought that our management partners would show their appreciation in this round of bargaining."

While Ottey and the rest of the LiUNA bureaucracy never called for pandemic pay, thousands of construction workers most certainly would have done so if they had possessed their own fighting organizations committed to the shutdown of all nonessential activity with full pay for workers until COVID-19 was brought under control. Instead, because the privileged trade union bureaucrats wanted to stay on good terms with their "management partners," they were forced to get infected on the job with COVID-19 and spread the deadly virus to their friends and loved ones.

Construction workers were not alone in making this bitter experience. Unions across all sectors played a similarly disgraceful role, from the teacher unions in the education sector to Unifor in the auto plants and the UFCW in the meat packing industry.

If any doubt remained about whose side LiUNA is on, it was dispelled last week when its international vice-president for eastern and central Canada, Joseph Mancinelli, came out in support of the re-election of the Ford government in the June 2 Ontario election. In a laudatory op-ed comment in the *Toronto Sun*, a far-right tabloid, Mancinelli asserted that Ford, who has gutted public spending, attacked workers' rights, and prioritized corporate profits over the protection of human life during the pandemic, had introduced "fair labour laws" and "cut red tape" over the past four years.

The construction strike is unfolding amid a provincial election campaign dominated by the impact of the rising cost of living for working people. None of the political parties have any intention of improving workers' living standards and guaranteeing decent-paying, secure jobs. In fact, the Liberals and New Democrats, who are routinely hailed as "progressive" parties by most trade unions, are preparing to collaborate in the formation of a pro-austerity government. They are already in a governmental alliance at the federal level, where they are leading the charge to war with Russia, massively hiking military spending and enforcing "fiscal responsibility."

To secure above-inflation wage increases and improved working conditions, construction workers must take the struggle into their own hands by building rank-and-file committees completely independent of the corporatist trade unions and established political parties. Such committees would fight to make the current strike the starting point for a broader mobilization of working people against the construction bosses and the big business-government assault on workers' social rights as a whole.

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