

# Strike by Ontario construction workers for wage increases expands to include 43,000 workers

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The number of construction workers on strike across Ontario grew to 43,000 this week. The collective agreements for an array of construction trades workers expired on April 30.

Approximately 15,000 house frame builders, floor fitters and high-rise builders, members of the Labourers International Union of North America (LIUNA) Local 183, walked off the job on May 2 to demand wage increases that keep pace with galloping inflation. They were soon joined by 6,000 commercial operating engineers, members of the International Union of Operation Engineers Local 793, and 7,000 residential and commercial drywallers.

On Monday, May 9, 15,000 carpenters in the industrial commercial institutional construction (ICI) sector walked off the job, after overwhelmingly rejecting a contract offer that failed to match huge spikes in the cost of living.

The carpenters' strike developed in open rebellion against the Carpenters District Council of Ontario (CDCO), which recommended a rotten contract offer proposed by the Carpenters' Employment Bargaining Agency (CEBA). In an angry statement, the CEBA expressed disbelief that workers defied the union recommendation, declaring, "These negotiations resulted in province-wide settlements that were agreed upon by all the carpenters' locals, who also recommended these settlements to their membership for ratification."

Even after the carpenters turned down the deal, the terms of which the CDCO refused to publicly stipulate, CDCO President Mike York continued to claim that "nobody wants a strike." After last-minute talks aimed at averting the walkout failed, York finally declared that the carpenters would set up picket lines last Monday. Bargaining resumed Thursday.

At a picket line in Waterloo, union bureaucrats handed workers a flyer containing a list of vague bullet points. The flyer demanded "equity" and noted how construction workers continued to work during the pandemic because

Ontario's Progressive Conservative government conceded to the building contractors' demand that construction workers be deemed "essential." No mention was made of the unions' role in keeping workers on the job, despite the risks to their health posed by COVID-19.

The flyer also stated that the membership is not looking for a "fat bonus," ruling out demands for significant wage gains.

What workers are in fact demanding are wage increases to match inflation and to make up for decades of union-enabled, below inflation, sellout contracts. The union flyer hinted at this fact, noting that workers are making less money today than they did in 2012 for the same work. Needless to say, it did not explain that the unions have been fully complicit in enforcing one concessions-filled contract after another.

The approximately 80,000-strong workforce in Ontario's residential construction industry is a powerful section of the working class that could exert enormous economic clout in a genuine struggle for wage increases and improved working conditions. They work in an industry that has enjoyed booming profits as property developers and speculators have cashed in on skyrocketing residential and commercial property prices. Moreover, the workers' struggle comes at a time when other sections of workers across North America have also walked out to demand wage increases, including CNH agricultural equipment workers in Iowa and Wisconsin, nurses in California, and grocery warehouse workers in Ontario.

But the construction workers' struggle is being hamstrung by the unions, which have sought to ram through separate deals for each trade to divide and weaken the workers.

In February, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) imposed a rotten three-year deal containing a total wage "increase" of 8.6 percent for electricians. The ironworkers union then rammed through a 9 percent "increase" over three years for its members in

March. On a per year basis, these are both well below the current annual inflation rate of 6.7 percent, resulting in a real wage cut.

In a comment on social media responding to a previous *World Socialist Web Site* article on the strike, a member of Ironworkers Local 721 provided a revealing exposure of how the union bureaucracy engineered the passage of the below-inflation pay deal. The worker wrote, “our local voted it down to begin with but the vote wasn’t recognized. Then they did a revote while everyone was talking standing around. No one heard them, and they said anyone standing is for a yes and then motion passed.”

Meanwhile the IUOE has made clear its determination to bring the work stoppage by operating engineers to a conclusion as soon as possible. Mike Gallagher, the “business manager” for the IUOE Local 793, claimed his team is “eager to get back to the table.”

Plumbers and pipefitters remain on the job, despite rejecting their latest contract offers. Angus Maisonneuve, chair of the Provincial Negotiation Committee with the Ontario Pipe Trades Council, confirmed that workers would not strike during the week of May 9, even though a contract offer was rejected in a May 5 vote. The only reason Maisonneuve provided to keep workers on the job was that “meetings were scheduled this week,” adding “No job action required, business as usual.”

What a bunch of humbug! On May 5 plumbers and pipefitters rejected a contract offer that would increase wages by only 12.5 percent over the next three years, well below the rate of inflation.

The construction unions are bitterly hostile to leading a unified struggle of construction workers for improved pay and conditions because they know full well that such a movement could trigger a broader mobilization of working people facing the same problems in education, health care, manufacturing and other sectors. This is a scenario the union bureaucracy wants to avoid at all costs, especially amid a provincial election campaign where none of the parties have anything to offer the working class.

LiUNA and the Boilermakers union have openly declared their support for hard-right Premier Doug Ford, while some of the other construction unions will back a “progressive” vote for the Liberals or NDP, two parties committed to imposing austerity on workers no less ruthlessly than the Tories.

The unions’ goal is to keep the dispute confined within the pro-employer labour relations system, which is designed to facilitate the enforcement of the corporate elite’s demands. The collective agreements for construction workers expire every three years at the end of April. However, Ontario labour law stipulates that workers have the right to strike

only until June 15. After that, all outstanding contract issues are submitted to a government-appointed arbitrator.

Recognizing that convincing the workers to vote for below-inflation pay increases is proving difficult, Richard Lyall, President of the Residential Construction Council of Ontario (RCCO), is already banking on binding arbitration.

Arbitration robs workers of the right to strike or bargain collectively, and denies them even the possibility to vote on their terms of employment. Lyall, referring to the likelihood of deals being agreed, remarked, “(I)f they can’t, for whatever reason ... the best thing to do is to say, look, Let’s just get back to work. We’ll put this to arbitration.”

Arbitration is increasingly being used as a tool to smother opposition from the working class to rotten deals cooked up by corporate management and their partners in the union bureaucracy. In March, arbitration was imposed on 3,000 CP Rail workers by the Teamsters union. During the same month, an imminent strike by 16,000 college instructors was sabotaged when the Ontario Public Service Employees Union sent their dispute to arbitration.

This record shows that if construction workers are to prevail in their struggle, they must urgently seize control of the strike from the hands of the trade union bureaucrats. By establishing rank-and-file strike committees, the strikers can advance demands based on what workers need to live, not what the construction bosses and union executives claim is “fair.” This must include an immediate 30 percent pay increase to make up for years of wage stagnation and rampant inflation.

The rank-and-file strike committee should fight to expand the strike to all construction workers across the province, including those who have had illegitimate contracts enforced on them through underhanded union tactics. They should also appeal to other sections of workers to join a mass movement for improved wages, cost-of-living adjustments tied to inflation and improved pensions and benefits. These urgently necessary demands will only be secured through a frontal assault on the domination of social and political life by the financial elite, including the real estate speculators, and the reorganization of society along socialist lines.



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