

Striking Ontario construction workers speak out: “What they’re offering is nothing. It’s a slap in the face. Corporate greed”

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Are you a construction worker? Contact the World Socialist Web Site to discuss the issues involved in your strike and build a rank-and-file strike committee.

Construction workers across Ontario began walking off the job over two weeks ago to protest a miserable below-inflation pay offer by the building companies. Despite the best efforts of the trade unions to divide the workers by trade and isolate their struggles, over 40,000 workers have been off the job and on picket lines since last week.

The strike includes house frame builders, floor fitters, and high-rise construction workers represented by Labourers International Union of North America (LiUNA) Local 183, crane and equipment operators from the International Union of Operating Engineers Local (IUOE) Local 793, and demolition and asbestos abatement workers, who are members of LiUNA Local 506.

Workers are demanding pay increases that keep pace with inflation, improvements to workplace safety, and better work benefits. The employers, who have made massive profits over recent years thanks to the property speculation boom, are trying to impose a miserly 9 percent pay “increase” over three years for many strikers, which equates to less than half of the current nearly 7 percent annual inflation rate. The unions have collaborated with the bosses in imposing these rotten terms on some trades, as shown by the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers’ (IBEW) enforcement of a mere 8.6 percent pay “increase” on electricians over three years in February.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* visited a picket line of demolition workers in Toronto Friday to discuss the issues in the strike. Workers underscored that the sharp rise in the cost of living is driving their struggle and criticized the unions for forcing specific trades, including members from the same local, to continue working during the strike.

Asked why he is striking, Manuel, a demolition worker, said, “They do not want to give us money. They only want to give us 4.5 percent over three years. We say no. We are asking at least for \$10 per hour over three years.”

He continued, “It is very hard to live right now. Things are

really expensive, and they are going up. It has been tough supporting a family, but we just keep going. I am the only income earner. My wife is retired.”

Mamadi, another striker, added, “Everything’s going up, up, up. You go to the store, get something for two dollars. Two, three days later you go back, it has gone up again. When I buy something at the store these days, I have to buy more. Because when I go back the following day, it costs more.”

Another worker commented, “It is a money issue. Inflation is way up. Everything is going up except our pay. That is why we are here. And what they are offering is nothing. It is a slap in the face. Corporate greed.

“They could give us a ten dollar raise and still be profitable. If it weren’t for us, they would not be making all that money.”

Kwon, another worker on the picket line, also spoke about the devastating impact of inflation, which has exploded following the infusion of trillions into the markets in the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, the disruption of supply chains and the imperialist powers’ pursuit of economic warfare against Russia. Asked what an acceptable offer would look like, he replied, “It should at least match inflation. If we are going below that, we are not making money. We cannot afford anything here. It is hard. I pay rent. It is hard for me to do rent and food. Gas is really expensive.”

In addition to the skyrocketing cost of living, striking construction workers want improved workplace safety measures. “Even here at this site, everyone is supposed to wear safety glasses and a helmet and reflector vests and all that, but it is not really practiced,” said a striker. “You walk past guys and they do not have any of that PPE on. So, the company neglects it to a certain degree.

“With COVID, there were guys walking around with no masks on. I did not see anyone enforcing that.

“Another thing is we do not even get hot water in the winter. We are supposed to have a shower when we come out of the enclosure that we work in. We wear a hazmat suit because we work with asbestos, or lead, or whatever the case may be. So, when you take a shower, you should at least have some hot water. Sometimes there is not even heat on the floor you are

working on. The temperature is negative twenty Celsius. You shower in cold water, you come out and there is no heat. You get sick like that.”

Mamadi was angered by the fact that LiUNA is forcing members of the same local to continue on the job while the demolition and asbestos workers strike. “If everybody went out, we could get everything we want,” he said. “The strike would be over quick. There are guys working inside right now, and we are in the same union. It is the same local, 506.”

LiUNA Local 506 has justified this outrageous action by claiming that they have reached an agreement with the construction bosses for a retroactive pay rise for another section of construction workers in the local. But it has so far refused to release the details.

The goal of LiUNA and the other unions is to string out the workers on the picket line for several weeks while ensuring the strike has as little impact on the construction companies’ bottom line as possible. The pro-employer labour relations system, which the unions pay far more respect to than the members they claim to represent, stipulates that strikes in the construction industry can only last from May 1 to mid-June every three years. Issues that are still in dispute in mid-June, like pay and workplace safety, are automatically sent to binding arbitration.

The binding arbitration process is rigged to produce an outcome favourable to the bosses. A government appointee reviews the dispute and issues a ruling which both the employers and unions must accept. Rank-and-file workers have no chance to vote on their new terms of employment and are robbed of any right to strike or collectively bargain for three years.

Another worker, asked why the entire union membership was not called out, responded, “That’s what we are saying. What all the unions should do is strike at one time. All construction workers, everyone, one time. Since it is brotherhood, stick together.

“You got the road workers, the crane operators. But we should all get together and say this is the day we are going to do it. This is what we are looking for. There is no unity right now.”

Another worker simply added, “There is no unity. The right hand is not talking to the left hand and vice versa.”

Kwon explained how the union is keeping workers in the dark about negotiations: “We are not hearing anything. We are supposed to meet up as a group regularly and discuss things like the pay increase.”

“From the company’s perspective, it is good that some of us are still working,” he observed.

The workers were angered by media reports attempting to portray construction workers as highly paid. “Are you kidding me?” one worker said in disbelief. “This is dangerous work we are doing. We are removing asbestos. We are removing lead. One slip-up and if your mask is not working properly, you

know.

“How are you gonna put a price on somebody’s life? He is going in there, cleaning asbestos and lead for you, and you are gonna tell him that thirty bucks is enough? It is too much? That is my life! I am worth more than that.

“There are not too many people signing up for this job. We are at the bottom of the totem pole. Sometimes we do not get the amount of respect we deserve.”

“We are put at more risk, because we go inside and do more asbestos work,” added Kwon. “We scrape it off, repair it. We deal with chemicals, and we wear a special mask. There are fibers that can affect our lungs, and cause cancer.

“We have to wait ten years to find out if we develop cancer from the work, or if we are breathing in fiberglass. So, after ten years, maybe less, we have to go see a doctor about these things.”

If their struggle is not to be led to defeat by the pro-corporate unions, striking construction workers in Ontario must immediately seize control of the struggle by establishing rank-and-file strike committees at every work site. These committees must formulate demands based on what workers need, not what the bosses assert is “affordable.” This should include an immediate \$10 per hour pay increase, a cost-of-living adjustment to keep pace with monthly inflation increases and strengthened workplace safety rules.

The strike committees must broaden the struggle to all construction workers in Ontario, who should down tools until their demands are met.

Above all, construction workers should appeal to other sections of working people across Canada and internationally confronting the same hardships produced by stagnating wages and dangerous conditions to join a unified worker-led counter-offensive against the domination of social and political life by the capitalist ruling elite and their political representatives, and the securing of decent-paying, secure jobs for all through the fight for the reorganization of society along socialist lines.



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