

Ontario construction workers demand unified struggle as trade unions keep strikers divided: “We need everybody to come out to strike”

Jake Silver, Sterling Oliver
19 May 2022

Are you an Ontario construction worker? Contact the World Socialist Web Site to help build a construction workers rank-and-file strike committee to take forward your struggle and prevent the unions from selling it out.

Over 40,000 construction workers across Ontario began walking out May 2 to demand wage increases that keep pace with inflation and improved workplace safety rules. House frame builders, floor fitters, crane and equipment operators, asbestos and demolition workers, and other trades overwhelmingly rejected pathetic contract offers from the building companies, which would have imposed a 9 percent pay “increase” over three years. With inflation running near 7 percent, the employers’ offer amounted to a massive pay cut.

Anger is mounting among the strikers over the role of the Labourers International Union of North America (LIUNA) and other unions, which are dividing workers by profession and even within the same local, by ordering some to remain on the job while others strike.

A striking asbestos remediation worker who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* at a downtown Toronto picket line Wednesday declared, “We hope everyone will come together and do the same thing and we hope everyone will start picketing, but right now what we are seeing is ‘one at a time.’”

“It should be all at once, it should not be this local starts from April, this one starts in May, it should not be like that. What we are hoping is all the unions come together to strike. We are not making a big enough impact.”

He explained that workers were eager to join the struggle, but were being held back by the unions’ refusal to call them out. “Some other guys walked out, like the sheet metal guys walked out just to respect us,” he said. “But it is not like they are gathering together, they are just walking out just to show respect. We should be all together. Standing up together! Picketing together!”

Asked about broadening the strike to other sections of workers, including teachers and health care workers, the worker noted how favourable conditions are to do this. “Yes, because I know for sure they are going to be going on strike too after inflation hits them,” he said.

Another striker, noting ongoing activity on the construction site, commented, “How come they aren’t also striking? We need everybody to come out to strike.”

Asked whether he thought every construction site should walk out, Michael responded, “I totally agree with that.”

“I’ve been here 19 years and I have seen how it’s changed,” he continued. “We have to fight for the little wages that we get right now. For the new guys who are coming up it’s the same thing. I tell them look, I do not want to be out here striking. I would rather be working or at home. But for the young guys coming up, it sucks. The cost of living is through the roof right now.”

A unified struggle by construction workers would call for wage increases that keep pace with inflation and a cost-of-living adjustment to make up for the years of stagnant pay imposed by the unions. “We’re looking for more money,” a striker said. “Right now, we’re fighting for 8 or 9 dollars [more per hour].”

A second worker added, “We are looking for increases of three, three, and three dollars over three years. First, they offered us nothing. This will match inflation. Let’s say inflation is 10 percent, this is about \$3 per hour.”

Workers also want their struggle to demand improved job site safety. A striker said, “You know the company, they just want business and they want the job done. They do not care about our safety. They do not care about the safety of the workers they just want the job done and to bill. Lowest cost, fast as possible.

“There are always injuries. We see people get sick, having COVID, many people. Many people went home, but they hide that.”

The unions’ opposition to calling out all 80,000

construction workers in the province is part of a deliberate strategy to sell out the struggle. Under Ontario's pro-employer labour relations system, construction workers can only strike between May 1 and mid-June every three years. Any outstanding issues in dispute by mid-June, such as pay or workplace benefits, are automatically submitted to binding arbitration. This procedure is an anti-democratic mechanism designed to impose the bosses' demands. A government-appointed official gets to dictate workers' terms of employment for the next three years, while workers lose any right to vote on them, let alone strike or bargain collectively.

LiUNA and the other unions hope that if they can string workers out on the picket lines for another few weeks, they can wind up the struggle, declare they have fought the good fight, and claim they have no "legal" alternative but to go to binding arbitration in June.

The trade unions have suppressed every workers struggle for wage and benefit improvements over the past four decades. The construction unions are determined to continue this record of betrayal because they know that the skyrocketing cost of living is creating the conditions for the emergence of a mass worker-led movement for wage increases and secure jobs. The unions want to avoid at all costs the development of such a movement, especially in the midst of a provincial election campaign that has seen them support right-wing political parties responsible for imposing austerity on working people and infecting them with COVID-19.

LiUNA along with other construction trade unions—including the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), United Association (UA), Ontario Pipe Trades Council (OPTC) and International Union of Painters and Allied Trades (IUPAT)—are urging members to vote for hard-right Premier Doug Ford's Progressive Conservatives in the June 2 provincial election.

Ford has spent the last four years gutting public spending, and maintaining a 1 percent wage cap on over 1 million teachers, health care staff, and other public sector workers. His government has presided over a "profits before life" response to the deadly coronavirus, declaring hundreds of thousands of workers, including all construction workers, to be "essential." This move ensured that there was no interruption to the profits of big business as millions of Ontarians got infected and over 13,000 died.

Other unions, including the Ontario Federation of Labour, have called for workers to support the New Democratic Party (NDP) or Liberals as supposed "progressive" alternatives. In reality, whenever these parties have held power, they have imposed no less ruthlessly the dictates of big business than the Tories. During the period 2011-14, the

NDP propped up Kathleen Wynne's minority Liberal government, allowing for significant cuts to education and health care spending.

As a striking worker put it to the WSWS when asked about the election campaign, "It does not matter. They are all the same at the end of the day. Everybody has their own agenda, but nothing is going to change."

WSWS reporters insisted that workers must take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands by establishing rank-and-file strike committees. These committees should advance demands based on what workers need for a comfortable standard of living and safe working environment. They should also broaden the struggle to all construction workers, along with workers in manufacturing, auto, education, and health care, whose paychecks are all being eaten up by rampant inflation.

Workers agreed that currently they have virtually no say over how the strike is conducted by the unions. "You basically do not have a say of what is really going on," remarked Michael. "At our last meeting they said anybody have a question? And they took two guys. There was not really a dialog about what was going on."

Another worker added, "Of course we need to work, but we need to fight for something. I think it is about social change. Our voice must be loud to be heard."

After a discussion about the need for workers to adopt a socialist and internationalist program to unify their struggles around the world with their class brothers and sisters against inflation and the threat of world war due to the US/NATO war with Russia, Michael responded, "Well I hope you guys are pushing your agenda because helping the base of workers is nice, you know what I am saying. Because right now, as you said, the company is a corporation and I know in the union these guys are out to make money, I do not dispute that one bit."



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact