

Over 3,500 Metro grocery workers strike in Toronto area

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Thirty-seven hundred grocery workers at 27 Metro stores throughout the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) went on strike Saturday morning after rejecting a contract recommended by the Unifor union. The workers, who were determined to significantly improve their wages, voted by a remarkable 100 percent for strike action this past June, with a strike date set for July 18.

However, minutes after the strike deadline passed, Unifor announced that a tentative agreement had been reached and instructed workers to forgo their imminent strike action.

The developments over the ensuing 10 days showed once again the absolute bankruptcy of the union bureaucracy. Hailing the proposed deal, Unifor president Lana Payne proudly announced that the just negotiated settlement was a “milestone agreement that underscores Unifor’s deep commitment to grocery workers in the retail sector and our important work to advance their workplace rights.” She then bragged that the deal would act as a pattern for thousands of other grocery store workers organized by the union who face the expiration of their own contracts over the coming year.

Unifor does not have a “deep commitment” to grocery store workers or their rights, but rather to the suppression of the class struggle. Under conditions in which a rebellion is developing against the union bureaucracy by workers from a range of economic sectors, as shown by workers repeatedly rejecting contracts recommended by union bureaucrats, Unifor wanted to do all it could to prevent a strike.

Canada’s largest private-sector union is a key pillar of support for the pro-war, pro-austerity Liberal government, which has ridden roughshod over the rights of West Coast dockworkers’ in recent weeks as

it seeks to enforce a government-dictated contract to avert another port strike.

Payne’s effort to sell the agreement fell flat. This past Friday, even as Payne was still promoting the contract proposal as “the best deal in decades,” Metro workers voted to soundly reject the recommendation of the union. Picket lines went up shortly thereafter.

The workers had made no secret of their demand that poverty level wages at the giant corporation must be addressed. They point out that the previous 2019 contract provided for a miserly 40 cents per hour increase with subsequent inflationary pressures further eroding their compensation.

Most full-time, non-supervisory workers make between \$16 and \$17 per hour, in one of the most expensive urban areas to live in Canada. Seventy percent of the company’s labour force are part-time workers, many of whom cannot even afford to buy food at the stores in which they work. At its height last year, inflation in Ontario neared 9 percent. In Toronto, food prices have surpassed 11 percent price spikes, while rents in the city are among the highest in the country with a one-bedroom apartment averaging nearly \$2,500 a month. The average inflation rate between summer 2022 and last month is recorded at 7.6 percent.

Even as grocery workers continued working throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Metro, as well as Canada’s two other dominant grocery chains, Loblaw and Empire, clawed back a \$2 per hour “hero” bonus after just three months, in June 2020.

Metro’s operations record annual sales of \$18 billion across its national 950-store network. In January 2022, the company reported a jump in first-quarter profits of 8.6 percent. By April of this year, profits were increasing by 10.4 percent. Metro CEO Eric Lafleche receives compensation of approximately \$4.9 million a

year, while Executive VP Carmen Fortino receives \$2.1 million. Both also receive additional performance bonus payments. Among the three top grocery companies, a collective \$3.6 billion in profits were reported last year.

Payne, deploying the cynical skills of a long-time union bureaucrat, is now trying her best to restore even a fig leaf of credibility for the exposed leadership after the rank-and-file forced the strike to go ahead.

“This decision to go on strike,” she blustered, “comes after years of these workers being nickelled and dimed while facing increased precarity and eroded job quality. It comes after having pandemic pay stripped away. It comes at a time of record profits and soaring CEO compensation. It comes at a time when life has become simply unaffordable for so many of these workers who risked their health and safety during the pandemic. We brought the tentative agreement to our members because it contained considerable gains, but our members are clear that it simply isn’t enough.”

Metro workers must place no confidence in the Unifor bureaucracy to redress their brutal exploitation by management. They should organize rank-and-file strike committees independent of the union officials to prevent another sell-out and broaden the struggle to other sections of workers.

Only last year, after a seven-day strike in April 2022, 900 Metro warehouse workers in Toronto were presented by Unifor with a contract virtually identical to one just rejected by the membership. The 15.8 percent pay increase over four and a half years was the same as the 14 percent over four years initially rejected by the workers, a real-terms pay cut.

In the fall of 2020, 1,400 Dominion Stores workers in Newfoundland struck for 12 weeks after rejecting a rotten Unifor-backed tentative agreement. The union deliberately isolated the strikers, wearing them down to the point where they could see no other option but to accept a contract virtually identical to the deal they had previously rejected. When the strike began, 83 percent of the Dominion workforce was made up of low-wage part-time employees with no or minimal benefits. Fully three-quarters of the workers made less than \$14 per hour, with a majority of the part-timers labouring at or just above the then provincial poverty-level minimum wage of \$11.65.

Striking workers at Metro must pursue their

legitimate claims for a significant rise in wages with the understanding that the union bureaucracy is the main obstacle to their militant struggle and will now seek to wrap up the strike as quickly as possible with a settlement as close to the rejected deal as they can manage. But conditions are extremely favourable for the development of a broad-based movement in the working class against the persistent attacks of the corporations against their living standards.

A strike wave is currently developing across North America, including ongoing strikes by tens of thousands of US screenwriters and actors as well as 1,400 National Steel Car workers in Hamilton, Ontario. The fight by dockworkers in British Columbia, where workers have stood firm and rejected rotten deals put before them by their own union at the bidding of the port employers and the Trudeau government is part of the same fight.

And those battles will soon be joined by 18,000 Canadian autoworkers, who are also Unifor members, and another 150,000 American autoworkers. These struggles must be unified into a worker-led counteroffensive against the capitalist austerity being enforced by the union-backed Trudeau Liberal government, and to secure decent-paying, secure jobs for all.



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