

Ontario judge intervenes against militant Toronto-area Metro grocery workers strike

Carl Bronski
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Ontario Superior Court Justice William Chalmers granted the giant Metro supermarket chain an injunction it was seeking Tuesday to severely limit picketing at its two Toronto-area food distribution warehouses.

The warehouses supply foodstuffs to retail stores throughout the Greater Toronto Area and across the province. The injunction also applies to picketing at corporate offices of Metro, Canada's third largest grocer.

Striking Metro workers had blocked trucks from moving products in and out of the two warehouses for the past six days. The temporary injunction is in effect until September 1.

The strike of 3,700 workers at 27 Toronto-area Metro supermarkets, being waged against poverty-level pay, is in its fifth week.

The court's anti-democratic ruling applied what is now a virtual "go-to" template for restricting secondary picketing in Ontario and across Canada. It ordered Unifor to immediately remove any blockades. Pickets, according to settled pro-corporate jurisprudence on the matter, are to be allowed to delay delivery vehicles for no more than five minutes, but must then allow vehicles—including those driven by or conveying scabs and professional strikebreakers—to pass.

If one cuts to the core of the rambling judicial rulings on picket line activity in Canada, they unequivocally say—without even a blush—that workers' picket lines are acceptable just so long as they are totally ineffectual and allow private corporations to continue raking in profits unhindered while starving out striking workers. However, as soon as they pose even a limited threat to an employer's bottom line, they should be immediately outlawed.

Unifor officials quickly bowed to the court order. In keeping with the role of the union bureaucracy across Canada, which prioritizes the defence of the pro-employer, state-enforced labour relations system over workers' needs and interests, union president Lana Payne meekly responded, "Front-line grocery workers will continue their legal picketing at Metro's distribution centres as permitted by the

judge's order. Unifor remains hopeful that Metro will return to the bargaining table with an offer that addresses the significant affordability challenges facing its front-line workers."

Shortly after Payne's statement was released, national union representative Barry Lines announced that the union had resumed negotiations with Metro management. Payne followed up with an announcement that not only will the union kowtow to the court ruling, it will entirely end picketing at the warehouses, forgoing even the perfunctory 5-minute delays permitted by the injunction.

Such statements, combined with the court injunction's unusually short term, strongly signal that the union and the company are moving quickly toward finalizing another inferior tentative agreement. If workers are on strike, it is only because they decisively rejected an agreement that Payne, the national union and Local 414 leaderships had hailed.

Workers familiar with Unifor's treacherous performance during the bitter 12-week strike at Loblaw's Dominion grocery store chain in Newfoundland will see a disturbing pattern. In 2020, 1,400 extremely low-paid Newfoundland grocery workers similarly were ordered to lift an effective warehouse blockade with the acquiescence of union officials. Local president Carolyn Wrice immediately hailed the court injunction because, following the ruling, negotiations restarted with the company.

Two weeks later, workers were presented with a virtual carbon copy of the miserable tentative agreement the union had cooked up with Dominion management before the strike began and which the rank-and-file soundly rejected. After surviving for weeks on meagre strike benefits, the Newfoundland workers reluctantly and angrily voted to ratify the second agreement.

A similar debacle was engineered by Unifor officials last year at Metro's Toronto food distribution warehouses. There, 900 workers struck after roundly rejecting a contract recommended by the union. Seven days later, a virtually identical contract was presented but dressed up in somewhat

different clothing. Billed by Unifor as a better deal, the “new” agreement now offered a 15.8 percent pay increase over four-and-a-half years—virtually the same as the 14 percent over four years initially rejected by the workers. Both offers provided for actual real wage cuts due to past and current inflationary pressures.

All these disputes, and others to come, take place under conditions where Metro, Loblaws and Empire (Sobeys)—the other major national grocery chain—continue to report ever-burgeoning profits, ballooning pay packages for their executives and fat returns for their stockholders. This past year Metro increased compensation for its top five executives by nearly 14 percent. Eric La Flèche, the chief executive, was paid \$5.4 million in total compensation, up 6.8 per cent. Earlier this month, Metro reported third quarter sales increases of nearly 10 percent year over year to \$6.4 billion in the quarter, resulting in adjusted profits of \$314.8 million in the quarter, up 10.9 per cent.

Meanwhile, full-time Metro workers currently only earn on average between \$20 and \$21 per hour. Part-time workers, who account for almost 75 percent of the workforce, earn less than \$17 per hour, slightly above the provincial minimum wage. At its height last year, inflation in Ontario neared 9 percent. In Toronto, food prices have surpassed 11 percent spikes while rents are amongst the highest in the country. The average inflation rate across the country between summer 2022 and this past June was recorded at 7.6 percent.

The contract originally proposed by Metro, unanimously endorsed by the Unifor bargaining unit and enthusiastically promoted by Payne as the “best deal in decades” was yet another poverty-wage offer. The four-year deal included an eventual increase of \$3.75 per hour for full-time and some senior part-time workers, with \$1.05 in the first year and 90 cents in the following three years. The vast majority of part-time workers were offered a paltry \$2.65 an hour over the life of the deal.

Workers have demanded that the deal must also include the immediate restoration of the \$2 per hour “covid bonus” that was introduced with much self-serving fanfare by the grocery companies in March 2020 to staunch an exodus of employees and that they then cynically withdrew three months later.

Payne’s initial gushing portrayal of this rotten proposal as “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” shows the vast gulf that exists between the union bureaucracy and the rank-and-file workers that it pretends to represent.

After the resounding rejection of her recommendation, Payne, in an effort to restore a fig leaf of credibility for the

union, suddenly recognized the “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.”

Payne has yet to answer the question: Why would she extol a deal and so vigorously encourage its acceptance when her members are enduring such appalling circumstances? Of course, the truth of the matter lies in the fact that Unifor, as do all the union bureaucracies, acts today as little more than the junior partner of the corporations. Its task is to suppress workers’ anger and push through poverty-level contracts designed to further fatten the profits of the big business, while providing political support for the pro-war, pro-austerity Trudeau Liberal government and its phony “left” ally, Jagmeet Singh’s New Democratic Party.

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.

There is great sympathy amongst Torontonians—and indeed across the country—for the plight of poorly-paid grocery workers. Moreover, workers in industry after industry are entering big class battles against miserable contract offers. Only a few days ago, 18,000 Detroit Three autoworkers, for whom Unifor is the bargaining agent, voted by almost 99 percent in favour of strike action when their contracts expire September 18. Metro workers must immediately organize rank-and-file strike committees independent of the union apparatus to prevent another sell-out and broaden their struggle to other sections of workers.



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