

# Unifor sells out five-week strike by Toronto-area grocery workers with imposition of major real-terms pay cut

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A militant five-week strike by 3,700 grocery store workers in the Greater Toronto Area came to an end this past Thursday with workers reluctantly ratifying a rotten, sellout contract that roundly failed to address the poverty-level wage issue that first sparked the walkout. Unifor, the bargaining agent for the workers within the rigged “collective bargaining” system, as is their habit when ratification votes show significant worker dissatisfaction, refused to release the final vote totals.

The courageous strike only took place because the workers in 27 outlets of the giant, highly profitable Metro retail grocery chain overwhelmingly rejected a miserable tentative agreement in late July that had been unanimously recommended by their local union bargaining committee. Prior to the workers’ rejection of the concessions-filled contract, it was touted by Unifor president Lana Payne as “the best deal in decades.”

Workers speaking to reporters after the rejection of the initial tentative agreement said that many could not even afford to shop for food in the stores in which they worked. In one of the most expensive cities in Canada and with over 70 percent of Metro’s workforce receiving only part-time hours, many workers reported a reliance on food banks to stretch their family’s grocery supply to the end of each month.

Part-time workers earned only \$16.62 per hour under the old contract, barely above the province’s current minimum wage. Full-time employees earned between \$20 and \$23 per hour. The new deal provides for a \$4.50 per hour increase spread out over five years—an average of 90 cents per hour per year. The previously rejected four-year tentative contract that instigated the strike offered full-time workers \$3.65 over four years. That amounted to a 91-cent increase per year.

With the provincial minimum wage rising to \$16.55

next month, newly hired part-time workers will only slightly stay ahead of the legislated minimum. For senior part-time workers, the new deal will add \$3.20 per hour over five years. That sum amounts to only 64 cents per year. Yet the previously rejected offer was \$2.65 over 4 years or 66 cents per year.

The fact that the new wage terms for part-time workers are even worse than the miserable settlement for full-time workers will act as an incentive for Metro management to eliminate further full-time positions, which already make up a minority of the workforce.

At last Thursday’s ratification meeting, the union once again recommended acceptance for this freshly negotiated “new” deal, justifying a “Yes” vote because management had agreed to push around some of the monies from the back-end of the previously rejected contract to the first year of the new deal.

Unifor president Lana Payne could barely contain herself in announcing the ratification of the contract. “This is a historic collective agreement,” she gushed, “that sets a new bar for grocery store workers.”

Workers saw things quite differently. In a discussion with the *World Socialist Web Site*, one Metro worker remarked, “To me, if you can’t afford to give someone a livable wage, you shouldn’t be in business.” Underscoring that many workers would have continued the strike to secure a better agreement, the worker added, “I would have spent another five weeks out there if that’s what it took.”

Speaking to the *National Post* outside the ratification meeting, a meat wrapper commented, “They stretched it out to five years to screw us over even more. Stretching it out another year is like saying, ‘this is what happens when you go against Metro’....We just spent five weeks on the picket line for that? Oh my God, I feel like crying.

It's the biggest insult.”

A part-time worker told the *Post*, “For us working people, it's not enough. The union sold us out.” A part-time cashier stated, “This was supposed to be our movement. We may have wasted five weeks for nothing.”

Only days before the ratification vote, workers had watched as the union meekly kowtowed to a court injunction outlawing their effective blockade of crucial Metro facilities. The signal was clear. Unifor was not going to back the only action by the strikers that could give them the upper hand. Expressing the sentiments of many of those workers who reluctantly voted to pass the contract, one demoralized and starved out worker simply said, “I have a house. I have a kid. I have to support my family.”

In the week before the sellout, workers erected blockades at two of Metro's key food distribution centers. That militant action resulted in the beginning of shortages in not only Metro's strikebound Toronto area stores, but also in its stores across the province. An appeal by Metro management for a court injunction against the blockade was granted last Tuesday. Within the hour, Payne was giving interviews praising the Superior Court judge for his decision simply because it still allowed token picketing to delay trucks for up to an insignificant five minutes!

But Payne did not stop there. She announced that “in good faith” the union would withdraw all distribution center picketing, forgoing even the five-minute sop given by the judge. The new tentative settlement was announced shortly thereafter.

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.

There has been 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. 150,000 American autoworkers delivered a no less decisive strike mandate, showing their determination to walk off the job when their contracts expire four days earlier on September 14.

The workers at Metro, and indeed everywhere else, must draw crucial lessons from the betrayal of their strike by the union bureaucracy.

The pro-company union bureaucracies are the main obstacle to any militant struggle by the working class against their daily exploitation by the corporations. Workers need to develop their own rank and file committees completely independent of the rotten union apparatus to fight for major improvements in their pay and working conditions.

Conditions are extremely favourable for the development of a broad-based international movement in the working class against the persistent attacks of the corporations and the governments against living standards. Such a movement must shake the foundations of a profit system already in deep crisis and open the door for an offensive against capitalism itself.



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