

Ontario NDP mayor Horwath calls for use of scabs against striking Hamilton bus drivers

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Are you a bus driver in Hamilton? The WSWS wants to hear from you about your strike and to discuss how your fight can be taken forward. Contact us here or fill out the form at the end of this article for more information on building a rank-and-file committee.

Nine hundred Hamilton, Ontario bus drivers went on strike last week in pursuit of a significant wage increase and improved working conditions, particularly related to washroom breaks. The workers, members of the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), had already given a 99 percent approval for strike action last August. They then voted on November 5 to reject the city's "last, best offer" by an overwhelming 94 percent.

The strike is the first by municipal bus drivers since a bitter 12-week strike paralyzed the city 25 years ago. That 1998-99 work stoppage saw the union capitulate to management contract demands after a young, recently elected alderman, Andrea Horwath, alongside Dave Wilson, another alderman and former Hamilton Labour Council president, met with management in a bid to bring pressure on the union to accept defeat and end the strike. As later recounted by management's regional chairman, Terry Cooke, "Wilson and Horwath were blunt in their public statements. They strongly conveyed the message that council's final offer was reasonable and was not going to change no matter how long the union stayed out."

Learning nothing and forgetting nothing, Horwath has come a long way since those early days as a municipal management stooge. She is now the mayor of Hamilton, after a lengthy career as a provincial New Democratic Party (NDP) parliamentarian that saw her climb to the leadership of the Ontario party. In this position, Horwath happily propped up the austerity program of Dalton McGuinty's big business minority Liberal government for two and a half years, between 2011 and 2014, and eventually rose to leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition in 2018.

In the developing confrontation with the bus drivers, Horwath has already signalled to organizers of this coming weekend's national football Grey Cup final and

accompanying week-long festival taking place in Hamilton, that she will not stand in the way of "contingencies" and "backup plans" for contracted shuttle buses to transport the thousands of fans around town. Striking workers have called things by their right name and are preparing to take action against any use of imported scab transit operations.

In a direct echo of management's 1998 refusal to negotiate with the striking bus drivers, Horwath announced shortly after the current strike began that the miserable offer already rejected by the union membership will not be changed. Speaking like a corporate accountant, she told reporters that the city's offer was fair and reasonable. Nothing else can be offered because it would cause "significant financial hardship" to the city. In other words, from this mythical "workers champion"—take the deal or starve on the picket line.

But what exactly is this "fair and reasonable" contract offer? Bluntly speaking, it is a demand that the workers take a cut in their real wages.

The city has offered a 3.75 percent increase retroactive to January 2023, and then 3 percent increases in each of the next three years, which amounts to a 12.75 percent wage raise spread over a four-year contract. Workers are demanding a 4 percent per year increase over four years with an additional "market adjustment" to account for earlier wage erosion due to inflation. Said ATU Local 107 president Eric Tuck, "My members have taken real wage losses of 7 percent due to inflation over the last two years and we are being priced out of the very communities we worked to build and serve as the working core. By accepting another deal that fails to keep pace with inflation we are on the road to becoming the working poor, and that simply isn't acceptable or fair."

Tuck, however, has already signalled to management that he is prepared to reduce the perfectly justified wage demands of the membership.

Workers have insisted that their wage demands are entirely reasonable. After all, just this past summer 1,100 non-union municipal employees—mostly managerial and professional

staff—who already earn between \$120,000 and \$160,000 annually were given a 4 percent annual wage hike with an additional market adjustment award of up to 11 percent. Apparently, what was “fair” for the well-paid city managers and what is “fair” for rank-and-file workers is quite another matter.

The issue of wage erosion due to past years of spiking inflation has become a centerpiece in the upsurge of workers’ contract struggles. Corporate and government employers have fought to impose continued real wage cuts on their workforces in order to boost profits even as global capitalism spins into deeper crisis. Spiking inflation, they pontificate, is declining and workers’ so-called “lavish” wage demands must be suppressed. This is so much hogwash.

Grocery prices still are increasing by 5.8 percent a year and are projected to remain at or near that level. Automobile prices are 10 percent higher than only two years ago. The average rent increase this year is 11 percent—and climbs even higher in the larger municipalities with projections showing there is no relief in sight anywhere.

Horwath’s declaration of war against the bus drivers is in actuality a declaration of war against thousands of other municipal workers whose contracts will be negotiated in the coming months. As Lora Fontana, executive director of human resources for the city has noted, the municipality is “at the table” with six other unions (with five more in the queue) that would only be encouraged by a contract victory for the bus drivers. Fontana, who earns over \$212,000 per year, has been a vocal proponent of Horwath’s wage restraint offensive against city workers.

Horwath’s green-lighting of third party strike-breaking initiatives should come as no surprise to workers, especially to those in the ATU. The NDP claims to defend workers’ rights, but it has repeatedly been complicit in attacking them. In the spring of 2011, the Dalton McGuinty Liberal government stripped Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) workers of the right to strike by designating the TTC an essential service. The NDP and provincial labour leaders, including Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) affiliate ATU Local 113 which represents TTC workers, offered no resistance to this attack. Andrea Horwath simply limited her criticism to the unseemly speed with which the Liberals pushed the essential service legislation through the legislature.

Of course, Horwath’s positions simply echo those of her own party, which has steadily rampaged to the right since the much reviled Ontario NDP government of Bob Rae. Between 1990 and 1995, the Rae government arbitrarily ripped up signed union contracts and slashed social services. Later, with Horwath at the helm and in lockstep with the

OFL, the NDP propped up a minority Ontario Liberal government even as the Liberals imposed sweeping social spending cuts and criminalized teacher job action so as to ram through wage and benefit cuts. So desperate were Horwath and her fellow social democrats to curry favour with big business that their campaign in the subsequent June 2014 Ontario election was widely acknowledged to have been to the right even of the pro-austerity Liberals.

Federally, the NDP is currently in an official alliance with the Liberal government of Justin Trudeau. The NDP has pledged to prop up the minority Trudeau government until 2025 as it continues to cut budgets and effectively criminalizes militant strikes at the ports. With the support of the trade unions and NDP, the Liberal government has played a major role in the US/NATO war against Russia, massively increased military spending, and towed the imperialist line in the ongoing genocidal attacks of the Israeli state against the population of Gaza.

The bus drivers’ strike underscores that workers entering into struggle today are coming into direct confrontation with the NDP and its trade union backers. Horwath’s brazen support for strikebreakers exposes all of those pseudo-left political forces who continue to claim that the NDP represents the working class and can be pressured to fight on its behalf.

The only way forward is for workers to break politically with the Liberal/NDP/trade union alliance, which is the main mechanism for the enforcement by the ruling class of wage and public spending austerity. This task necessitates the construction of a socialist and internationalist leadership to arm the developing class struggle with a clear political perspective in opposition to the policies of austerity and war advocated by Horwath, her NDP colleagues, and backers in the union bureaucracy. This is the program fought for by the Socialist Equality Party.



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