

# 9,000 Liquor Control Board of Ontario workers on strike for real wage increases and job security

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Around 9,000 Liquor Control Board of Ontario (LCBO) workers walked out on strike at 12:01 a.m. Friday, July 5. Represented in contract bargaining by the Ontario Public Sector Employees Union (OPSEU) union, the workers, the majority of whom are precariously employed at the government controlled alcohol retailer and distributor, are demanding job security and wage increases to keep pace with inflation and overturn years of concessions.

LCBO workers have repeatedly voted for strike action in contract struggles over the last 30 years, including in 1998, 2000 and 2002 under the hard-right Harris Tory government, and in 2005, 2009, 2013 and 2017 against the union-backed Liberals. Workers have voted at least 93 percent in favor of a strike on every strike vote since 2005. However, OPSEU has succeeded every time in suppressing this readiness to fight. This time around, a turnout of 86 percent of LCBO workers voted by 97 percent in favor of strike action.

This determination to fight underscores the miserable working conditions at the publicly owned liquor stores and warehouses across the province.

Some 70 percent of the LCBO workforce consists of casual employees, meaning they have no access to workplace benefits and earn a lower wage than their permanently employed colleagues for performing the same job. While the average permanent employee earns \$31.46 per hour, a casual worker's average wage is just \$22.59. Some workers earn as little as \$17.65, little more than the province's poverty minimum wage of \$16.55. No mechanisms are in place for casual workers to transition to permanent full-time or part-time positions. These are conditions that will be familiar to tens of thousands of workers across grocery stores and other retail operations across the country.

Ontario's hard-right Progressive Conservative government led by Premier Doug Ford has agreed to allow retail and convenience stores to sell beer, wine, and ready-to-drink cocktails as of this summer, increasing fears among LCBO

workers that their jobs could be at risk.

The Crown corporation estimates that the change will result in \$150 million of the \$2.5 billion it contributes to Ontario's coffers each year disappearing. In this way, the Ford government will redirect more public funds to the private sector and increase pressure to cut public spending even further for health care, education, and social services, or what is left of them after decades of austerity by governments led by parties of all political stripes.

Backed by Ford, LCBO management has taken a hardline stance against the workforce. All stores will be closed for two weeks, but online ordering with free delivery will remain available. As of July 19, 32 stores across the province will be reopened on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays for weekend shoppers. Ontario Finance Minister Peter Bethlenfalvy said the Ford government was "particularly disappointed" in the workers' refusal to accept its privatization plans.

OPSEU—with approximately 180,000 public sector members across Ontario—has no intention of conducting a genuine struggle for LCBO workers' interests, which would necessitate appealing for a common fight with all workers throughout the retail and service industry to improve conditions, and all workers across Ontario and beyond to join a political struggle to defend public services. This is in spite of the fact that LCBO bargaining chair Colleen Macleod acknowledged Thursday that LCBO workers are in a political fight, describing Ford as a "ghost" at the bargaining table.

Instead of alerting workers and their supporters to the struggle against government privatization and attacks on worker rights that must be waged, the union is focusing on presenting a more credible business plan for the corporation, with emphasis being laid on the LCBO's need to provide, "Ontarians with the convenience they want." At the same time, OPSEU offers up vague pledges to defend public services, but offers no viable strategy to conduct such a

fight.

During negotiations, the union presented two potential futures for the LCBO. The first scenario is that private corporations eat into LCBO's domination of alcohol sales that see oligarchs fill their coffers while LCBO profits go down. The second scenario claims the LCBO can "grow with Ontario," which mostly consists of expanding retail locations and extending store hours. Neither scenario presented by the OPSEU bureaucracy benefits the LCBO workers.

At a press conference, OPSEU's Macleod said, "[W]e can't stand by while Doug Ford gives away the LCBO's revenues to big box and convenience chain CEOs. It's on Premier Ford and the LCBO to make sure that public services and good jobs don't get left behind."

In other words, the union bureaucracy is deliberately placing the onus on the government to defend the same public services they are gutting, to justify their inaction and cowardice. This undermines the position of LCBO workers, who must mobilize support from broader sections of the working class to stop Ford's attacks on public services and workers' jobs.

The union promotes the dead-end illusion of pressure politics—place enough pressure on the government and it will magically reverse its policy decisions. The government ignores pressure from below, responding only to the pressure of its real constituents in the ruling class.

The OPSEU bureaucracy is hostile to the independent mobilization of the working class in defense of social programs and good jobs. They justify their arguments in defense of LCBO revenues as if it is the only way to defend public programs under attack from government austerity. But this is not the case. The only way to defend social programs under conditions of relentless austerity imposed by governments at all levels to pay for war abroad and the enrichment of the wealthy elite is by breaking free from the suffocating anti-worker "collective bargaining" system. "Collective bargaining" is used by the union to straitjacket the working class and suppress the class struggle.

Conditions in Ontario and in fact across Canada are extremely favourable to the development of a broad-based, working-class-led movement in defence of public services and good-paying, secure jobs. A strike wave has swept across Canada over the past two years, involving education support workers in Ontario, public sector workers in Quebec, BC dockworkers, and federal public servants, among others. A decisive turn to these and other workers by LCBO strikers with an appeal to mount a common fight against privatization and social spending cuts, and for wage increases and an end to casualization, would meet with tremendous enthusiasm.

However, the last thing the OPSEU bureaucracy and the rest of the union apparatus want is to build a mass movement of workers, because that would challenge the anti-worker collective bargaining system that is the source of their six-figure salaries, dues-based perks and status.

The main obstacle for LCBO workers in their struggle to win their demands for real wage increases, permanent status, and workplace benefits is OPSEU and the trade union bureaucracy as a whole. For six years since Ford first came to power on a program of ruthless austerity and privatization, the unions have systematically demobilized workers whenever they have been in a position of strength.

This includes OPSEU and its much-touted president JP Hornick, who played a major role in the sabotage of the strike by 55,000 education support workers in late 2022. The low-paid workers, who courageously defied a strike ban by the Ford government, won the support of broad sections of workers. As calls grew for a general strike, Hornick was one of the numerous provincial and national union leaders who cut a backroom deal with Ford to withdraw his strike ban in exchange for the scuttling of the strike by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) with none of the workers' demands being met. With workers robbed of their opportunity to bring down Ford, CUPE rammed through a concessions-filled contract on the isolated education support workers.

To win their strike, LCBO workers must form rank-and-file committees that are independent of OPSEU at all retail locations and warehouses to take control of the struggle from the union bureaucracy. This is the only way workers can make demands that represent their genuine interests. From there they can go on the offensive against management and its government owners. LCBO workers must simultaneously appeal to other sections of the working class in the public and private sectors to spearhead a mass movement against austerity and attacks on worker rights, and for secure jobs and wages that keep pace with inflation.

All those who are interested in this fighting perspective and building rank and file committees should fill out the form below.



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