

Teamsters Canada sells out Swissport ground crew strike at Toronto's Pearson Airport

By Dylan Lubao
13 November 2017

After eleven weeks on the picket lines, 700 baggage handlers and other ground crew at Toronto's Pearson International Airport ended their strike against the airline services company Swissport last month. The workers, who are represented by the Teamsters Canada union, ratified the proposed contract by only 63 percent, pointing to widespread dissatisfaction with the agreement the union reached with the transnational company.

The union has refused to release any details of the deal. Union press releases after the vote claimed the contract contained "minor improvements on wages, benefits and scheduling." A worker who spoke to the WSWs expressed the feeling of dissatisfaction among the workforce, saying, "In the end we really don't know if we came out with anything or what really happened."

When WSWs reporters contacted Teamsters offices at the local and national level for details of the collective agreement, they were either given the runaround or flatly told that the union does not make this information public. The only "concession" workers appear to have won from the company is that the contract will run for three years, rather than the five originally demanded by Swissport.

With over a third of workers rejecting the contract, and no figures provided by the union on voter turnout, it appears that hundreds of strikers simply refused to attend the ratification meeting out of frustration with the union's orientation to the company and the big-business federal Liberal government. According to the worker who spoke with the WSWs, little more than 300 workers voted, which, if true, would be less than half of the total who went on strike.

Comments on the Local 419 Facebook page illustrated the frustration among workers. Under a notice that the strike had ended, one worker wrote, "Horrible contract. All companies have to do is hold out and wait. The striking workers will always fold."

Workers are well within their rights to be disgusted with the outcome of the strike. However, it was not they who folded, but their union leadership, whose nationalist and

pro-capitalist perspective has resulted in a never-ending series of reversals for workers.

The Swissport workers began their strike on July 27. Highly profitable Swissport, the world's leading supplier of airport services with contracts at more than 280 airports internationally, sought a three-year wage freeze, reduced benefits eligibility, and greater powers to change workers' schedules on the fly.

Under conditions where Swissport ground crew start at the poverty wage of \$11.75 per hour, the company attempted to dress up its offer by vowing to raise the starting wage to \$14 per hour. Pierre Payette, Swissport Canada's Vice-President of Operations, conveniently omitted the fact that the provincial minimum wage for federally-regulated workers will rise to \$14 in January 2018, which in any case remains completely inadequate for a single adult, let alone a worker supporting a family. Any wage gains would be eradicated by inflation and cost-of-living increases during the proposed wage freeze.

Debilitating injuries and early retirement run rampant among airport ground crew, who perform the backbreaking work of handling baggage, cleaning plane cabins, and guiding aircraft on the tarmac. A recent article by the CBC noted that the turnover rate at Menzies, one of Swissport's competitors, hit 160 percent last year.

Swissport, with approval from the federally-owned and administered Greater Toronto Airport Authority (GTAA), began recruiting poorly-trained scabs even before the strike began, providing them with safety certifications that ordinarily take weeks to obtain. This predictably resulted in widespread reports of damaged luggage and delayed flights once the strike began.

The determination of the strikers to fight for higher wages and better working conditions was everywhere evident on the picket lines. In August, when the union bargaining committee put forward a second contract offer virtually identical to that which the workers had rejected prior to going on strike, the rank-and-file again overwhelmingly turned it down.

The union bureaucracy never once explained why it presented these two rotten offers in rapid succession to its membership.

In truth, the Teamsters leadership was merely repeating the time-tested and anti-worker strategy deployed by their fellow bureaucrats in other unions like Unifor: keep the strikers isolated, wear them down, and continue to push the company's sell-out offer until the strikers give in.

After workers held a rally that temporarily disrupted car access to parts of the airport, the GTAA slapped injunctions on the strikers, barring them from protesting at one of the terminals and denying them the right to display their strike badges. The union leadership did nothing to oppose this anti-democratic maneuver, essentially telling the strikers that this was how it was going to be.

The conduct of the government-owned GTAA in aiding and abetting Swissport's strikebreaking has once again put the lie to the "progressive" pretensions of the Trudeau Liberal government. Their open hostility to the strike is of a piece with new measures to facilitate the creation of "ultra-low cost" airlines by further opening the domestic airline industry to foreign ownership, and their plans to privatize Canada's major airports. These measures would inevitably lead to still greater attacks on workers' wages and working conditions.

Throughout the strike, the union bureaucracy kept workers in the dark about its negotiations with Swissport, while doing everything in its power to keep the struggle limited to the most restrictive framework of collective bargaining.

In the process, union bureaucrats like Teamsters Canada President Francois Laporte and Teamsters General President James Hoffa fostered illusions that the ongoing North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) talks between the big-business Liberals and the far-right administration of Donald Trump in the US could yield benefits to workers. They commended Canadian Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland and her team, in spite of the fact that this same government was busy helping break the Swissport strike.

Workers at Swissport and at airports across the country must draw sharp lessons from this strike, in order that they may prepare themselves for the struggles to come.

The Teamsters' abject capitulation to Swissport's demands and failure to lead an effective struggle is not simply the result of bad leaders, no matter how rotten the current crop of union bureaucrats undoubtedly are. Workers have every right to be outraged at the current union leadership, but simply replacing the current leaders with lower-level officials or even switching to another union, as some workers are now proposing, will do nothing to secure improvements in pay and working conditions.

Indeed, Unifor, CUPE and the other unions that represent

the many thousands of airline workers who operate out of Pearson Airport did absolutely nothing to support the striking Swissport workers.

Basing themselves on nationalism and defense of the capitalist system, the trade unions are utterly incapable of advancing workers' interests under conditions where corporations can pack up and source production anywhere in the world. They have been transformed over the past four decades into a willing and well-paid arm of the corporations, whose apparatus has been increasingly integrated into management and the state.

A way out of the miserable working conditions at Swissport, which are replicated at companies throughout the airline industry both in the cabin and on the ground, can only be provided by the workers themselves. It requires the formation of new organizations of working class struggle, i.e. rank-and-file committees constituted independently of and in opposition to the trade unions, and controlled by the workers themselves. Swissport workers angered by the Teamsters' capitulation should form a rank-and-file committee to advance their own interests and appeal to other ground crew and airline workers to join their struggle.

Above all, airline workers seeking to fight back must reject the nationalism peddled by the unions and instead be guided by a socialist internationalist program. Nothing can be obtained on the basis of the unions' nationalist orientation to the big business Liberal government. Instead, airline workers and ground crew in Canada should seek the support of their colleagues in the United States and internationally for a common fight for better pay and working conditions against the global corporations which dominate the airline industry. This struggle can be waged only on the basis of a socialist perspective, which sets as its goal the conquest of power by the working class and the establishment of a workers' government committed to meeting the needs of the vast majority, rather than the profit demands of a tiny few.

This author also recommends:

"Whatever happens to us is going to happen to everybody else" Toronto airport workers speak out
[4 September 2017]

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>