

Canadian oil refinery boss lauds George Floyd protests while employing state violence against locked-out workers

By Carl Bronski
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In a statement oozing with hypocrisy and shameless untruths, Federated Cooperatives Limited (FCL) CEO Scott Banda weighed into the global controversy over police violence and racism earlier this month, characterizing his company as “an organization that is based on values of integrity, excellence and responsibility.” Banda and FCL management, meanwhile, continue to mount a government-backed, police- and court-enforced scabbing operation against 750 Regina, Saskatchewan, oil refinery workers with the aim of gutting their pensions and workplace safety measures.

Banda’s statement continues, “We cannot remain silent or still. The discussion ignited by George Floyd’s death cannot be ignored. As a society, there are basic standards we need to uphold: decency, compassion and respect. We each need to personally commit to these in all our interactions and hold each other accountable.”

What utter hogwash!

Banda, who ran for the provincial New Democratic Party leadership in the early 2000s, may shed a few crocodile tears for George Floyd after the African-American worker had the life squeezed out of him by Minnesota cops. However, the “concerned” CEO prefers to remain absolutely silent on his own reliance on police violence and state repression to continue fuel production at FCL’s Co-op Refinery Complex since locking out the workforce last December.

The refinery workers, members of Unifor, are resisting the imposition of sweeping contract concessions, including the evisceration of work rules, job losses and draconian pension cuts that would cost each worker upwards of C\$20,000 per year. During that time, at least two-dozen peaceful picketers have been arrested, including lead negotiator Scott Doherty and Unifor President Jerry Dias. In more recent negotiations with the union, FCL has insisted that any settlement must now include the firing of militant workers who stood up to the company’s attacks.

In early February, in actions reminiscent of events now

unfolding on the streets of American cities, Regina police, emboldened by Premier Scott Moe’s vow to “enforce the law,” set up an illegal checkpoint on a public road. Only fuel truckers on a pre-approved list were allowed to use the thoroughfare. Locked-out workers were refused entry to the public space and prohibited from exercising their constitutional right to picket as the police organized the dismantling of a two-week blockade. Dozens of fuel tanker trucks were then shepherded by police into the refinery and, throughout the following day, they removed millions of liters of gasoline and diesel for distribution to dry or nearly dry FCL retail outlets.

In the ensuing four months, workers have continued to be harassed by police, who have aggressively ticketed their cars parked near FCL sites, and threatened them with arrest. Last month, it came to light that police had recklessly failed to inform the locked-out workers and Unifor of a credible threat from right-wing pro-company elements to attack pickets with a bomb (see: “Canadian authorities failed to notify locked-out Regina oil refinery workers of threatened bomb attack”).

To oversee FCL’s scab-herding operation, Banda has acquired the services of the notorious anti-worker, anti-strike international security firm AFIMAC. And in spearheading FCL’s drive to smash worker resistance to its ever-increasing and never-ending concessionary demands, Banda has mobilized and solidarized himself with extreme right-wing elements.

The February police action to break the Regina blockade took place one day after Banda appeared at the blockade of an outlying FCL fuel depot in Carseland, Alberta. Flanked by the fascistic leaders of a self-proclaimed “Yellow Vest” movement and members of “United We Roll”—a far-right “independent” (i.e., owner-operator) truckers’ vigilante group that had earlier attempted to break up a worker-blockade at the depot—Banda gave a “shout out” to these forces.

Members of the United We Roll and self-styled Yellow Vest groups have regularly posted social media commentary boasting about “running over picketers.” They refer to indigenous peoples as “Prairie N#####rs” and have accused Muslim Canadians (who are referred to as “Sand N#####rs”) of deliberately starting the Fort McMurray wildfire.

Such is the “integrity” of FCL and its CEO. But it is not simply a question of the moral turpitude of this or that corporate figure—as true as that is. When he addressed the far-right crowd at Carseland last February, Banda insisted that issues raised in the class battle at FCL are of national, and indeed, international political importance. “Blockades as a tactic to get your way—that’s a challenge and a precedent we should all, as business owners and leaders of business, be very, very, concerned about. We owe it to every other business to not allow this illegal activity to set a dangerous precedent,” he intoned to the press and his allies amongst the gathering of fascistic goons.

Banda has only been able to act so aggressively because FCL has enjoyed the full-throated backing of hard-right Saskatchewan Premier Scott Moe, whose government explicitly sanctioned the company’s scabbing operation before the lockout began.

For their part, Unifor and the entire union bureaucracy have systematically demobilized and isolated the refinery workers, while at the same time organizing a series of protest stunts to cover up their miserable capitulation to FCL’s demands.

The worldwide, multi-racial and multi-ethnic demonstrations against generalized police brutality and specifically the murder of George Floyd have given expression to a powerful desire for fundamental change. Within this movement there are growing numbers of people who recognize that police brutality is a manifestation of deeper social ills, rooted in the economic structure of capitalist society, the decimation of workers’ living standards by the corporations and the extreme concentration of wealth within a small segment of the population.

This movement must be imparted with the understanding that the police violence directed against working people is not the result of just one particularly “greedy” corporate executive, or especially reactionary politician, or just a few “bad apples” in the police force. Rather, it is rooted in the character of capitalism, which subordinates the most basic needs of working people to the enrichment of a tiny elite, and of the capitalist state, which enforces the “rights” of private property and dispossession of the working class.

The threat of the emergence of a mass, working class movement against capitalism terrifies the modern-day robber barons of the ruling class. This is why they combine brutal state repression by the police and far-right thugs with

attempts to divert the seething opposition to attacks on living standards and democratic rights toward politically manageable channels.

Banda’s comments on the brutal murder of George Floyd, while patently aimed at whitewashing FCL’s image as a callous employer, pushed the racist narrative that now dominates all official discussion of police brutality. This narrative seeks to cover up the role of the police as enforcers for big business and shift responsibility for police racism onto the population as a whole.

Banda and FCL would not be in the position where they feel they can brazenly dictate the terms for any eventual end to the lockout were it not for Unifor’s utter refusal to mobilize broad sections of the Canadian working class against the watershed attacks contained in FCL’s contract demands.

The fight against FCL has never been a mere collective bargaining dispute with a single, ruthless employer, but a political fight against the right-wing Moe government, all the institutions of the capitalist state—the courts, the police, and the labour boards—and the corporate elite as a whole .

It is not by begging the Moe government to impose a concessions-laden settlement, as per the last feeble bleats of the Unifor leadership, that the locked-out workers will be able to oppose FCL’s onslaught. Rather, they must build new organizations of struggle—rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the pro-capitalist unions, that will mobilize the full social power of the working class in defence of its social rights.

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