

Canada: Unifor urges acceptance of historic concessions in oil refinery lockout

By Carl Bronski
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A tentative agreement was announced Thursday in the bitter six-and-a-half month lockout of 750 Saskatchewan oil refinery workers at the Federated Cooperatives Limited (FCL)-owned Regina complex. The miserable, concessions-laden proposal has been recommended for acceptance by Unifor, the union that organizes most refinery workers in Canada.

Although the fine details of the agreement will not be made public until workers vote on the contract on Monday, it is clear that the agreement approved by Unifor is a sellout that will meet all of management's sweeping concession demands.

For many weeks, Unifor has made no secret of the fact that it has capitulated to every one of the cuts to pensions, jobs and work rules ruthlessly demanded by the company. Local union President Kevin Bittman told reporters as much earlier this month, saying, "Right now we've actually offered the company everything that they've asked for, and the only thing that we request is that they don't fire 100 people. What we had going into this bargaining is pretty much toast."

FCL sought to victimize those workers taking the most active part in picketing over the life of the dispute. However, the union, as is standard in back-to-work agreements, was unable even to gain "amnesty" for these workers. Such is the nature of their abject surrender that they simply were holding out for a halt to FCL's plans for immediate firings, so that the matter could be first sent to a grievance procedure.

What exactly has been "toasted" in the tentative deal? The union has surrendered well over \$20 million per year in pension givebacks. It has been estimated that retiring workers will face losses in pension earnings of up to \$20,000 per year. The defined benefits pension program has been decimated, forcing workers to pay as much as 10 percent of their earnings

into a scheme that was previously fully financed by the company. An FCL-supported Savings Program is to be gutted. Scores, if not hundreds, of jobs are on the chopping block. Worker control over their own safety is to be compromised with new work rules and the pace of work intensified in a highly dangerous and volatile industry.

Notably, neither Bittman nor national Unifor President Jerry Dias in statements Thursday felt able to name a single item that had been successfully defended in the proposed settlement. Doing his best to put lipstick on a swill-smear pig of a contract, Bittman was only able to meekly thank the membership for their brave and determined battle against the company. For his part, Dias stated, "In this fight, we showed that Canada's workers are united and will fight to defend good jobs, even when governments and police services choose to side with the rich."

The locked-out workers fought bravely against FCL, as shown by their determined maintenance of picket lines in the freezing cold for months in the face of vicious state-backed repression. However, they were misled and betrayed from the very beginning by Unifor. The union insisted that the dispute must be confined to "collective bargaining" channels, but it was always a political fight.

The company enjoyed the strong backing of the right-wing Moe government, which helped FCL establish an army of hundreds of scabs to ensure its business could keep operating unhindered throughout the lockout. It also received crucial support from the capitalist courts, which banned all but the most token picketing by workers and imposed huge fines for alleged "breaches" of pro-company injunctions. Egged on by the right-wing government, the police also intervened to dismantle picket lines, arrest workers and

union leaders, and intimidate picketers.

The company also engaged the services of the notorious AFIMAC security agency and aligned itself with ultraright and neo-Nazi forces in the self-proclaimed Yellow Vest and United We Roll movements, who broke through solidarity pickets for the locked-out workers set up in Alberta.

FCL proceeded so aggressively because it knew what to expect from Unifor following the last contract bargained four years ago. In that deal, Unifor opened the door for the current attack on pensions by agreeing to a two-tier system that forces all new hires onto an inferior defined-contributions scheme.

In the runup to the December 5 lockout, Unifor conceded a scheme whereby the union would assist the company in seeking ways to move veteran workers from their defined-benefits program to the defined-contributions plan. Then in January, it sent a letter to the company agreeing to its demand that the union withdraw “preconditions” prohibiting negotiating reductions in the defined-benefits program. But this was not enough for FCL.

It then demanded that the union lift a 10-day blockade of the refinery before any talks could begin. Dias agreed. In the ensuing aborted one-day negotiation with FCL, the union offered to contribute six percent of worker earnings to a new pension scheme. Such was the nature of the capitulation that lead negotiator Scott Doherty admitted that he feared he and Bittman would be “beaten up” by the membership for the drastic concession offer. In the end, FCL declined, and exploited the temporary lifting of the blockade to ship out millions of litres of fuel to its hard-pressed network.

By mid-February, the union leadership was reduced to begging the Moe government for binding arbitration to end the lockout, a proposal that the viciously anti-worker government steadfastly refused to adopt. In March, FCL cynically used the impact of the coronavirus to escalate its concession demands once again.

This record of betrayal and capitulation underscores that workers cannot achieve any of their demands under Unifor’s leadership. To take forward their struggle for decent pensions and secure jobs, workers must reject the rotten concessions deal accepted by Unifor. But this must be connected with a political and

organizational break from Unifor through the establishment of rank-and-file action committees to take control of the struggle into their own hands.

The sweeping concessions demanded by FCL are being replicated in workplaces across the country, in the United States, and globally as the ruling elites seize on the coronavirus pandemic to ratchet up the exploitation of the working class. A key task of these committees must therefore be the broadening of the struggle for decent wages, pensions, and secure jobs into a counteroffensive by the working class across Canada and internationally to break the grip of the financial oligarchy over social life and place the needs of society as a whole ahead of corporate profit. Above all, this requires the waging of a political struggle against the right-wing Moe government and its counterparts at the provincial and federal levels to place political power in the hands of the working class.

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