

Canada: Worker resistance must be armed with a socialist strategy

Socialist Equality Party (Canada)
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Canada's corporate elite has launched an assault against the living standards of the working class of unprecedented ferocity and hypocrisy.

The bankers, captains of industry and investment house moguls and their servants in the establishment political parties are demanding that working people—cleaners, autoworkers, miners, garbage collectors and clerks as well as all those families dependent on basic social services—bear the full brunt of the greatest crisis of the capitalist system since the Great Depression.

Job cuts, contract concessions, and government cutbacks are exacting a harsh and ever-widening toll on workers in all parts of the country.

Since last October, more than 450,000 jobs have been eliminated as companies seek to protect the bottom line by destroying workers' livelihoods.

Retired workers now worry that their corporate pensions may be wiped out—a prospect that caused Ontario's government to rush to announce that it will not honour a three-decade-old partial pension guarantee.

In industry after industry, workers are facing demands for concessions, including co-pays and the outright elimination of benefits, two-tier wages, wage cuts, longer working hours, and speed-up.

The federal Conservative and Ontario Liberal governments combined this spring to threaten GM and Chrysler workers with the liquidation of the Detroit automakers' Canadian subsidiaries unless they agreed to sweeping wage and benefit cuts and job-cutting work-rule changes.

Similarly Ottawa has made loans to Air Canada conditional on the airline's workers accepting a 21 month wage freeze and deferment of the company's pension plan payments.

The role of the government in tying industry aid to worker concessions stands in stark contrast to its treatment of the banks and their CEOs and shareholders. With the full support of the Liberals and the other opposition parties, the Conservatives have extended the banks tens of billions in no-strings-attached loan guarantees and mortgage buy-backs.

Not satisfied with the massive concessions wrung from private sector workers, the ruling elite have now set their sights on the wages, benefits and working conditions of those in the public sector. There is a growing clamour from big business over the spiralling federal, provincial and municipal deficits caused by the economic slump.

Demands for contract concessions have driven Ottawa Transit workers,

British Columbia paramedics, home care attendants in Hamilton, and municipal workers in Toronto and Windsor into bitter confrontations with their employers.

From the standpoint of the ruling class, the attack on those who administer public and social services is a pivotal step in implementing their plans to resolve the state's fiscal crisis through another round of massive social spending cuts akin to those carried out in the mid-1990s by the federal Liberals under Chrétien and Martin, Ontario's Harris Conservative regime, and the provincial Parti Québécois government of Lucien Bouchard and Bernard Landry.

Over the past decade and a half, federal and provincial governments have effected sweeping changes in fiscal policy (including drastic reductions in corporate and capital gains taxes) aimed at swelling the incomes of the rich and super-rich, placing a larger share of the tax burden on working people, and reducing state revenues so as to trump demands for social spending. According to one estimate, the tax cuts made by Ottawa just since 2003 have resulted in \$160 billion in foregone revenue.

Now big business wants to use mounting budget deficits as the pretext for again slashing spending on health care, education, social housing, support for the aged, the arts and other vital social needs.

To achieve this goal, they recognize it is necessary to break the traditional militancy of public sector workers. It is this imperative that lies behind the current concession drives directed against Windsor and Toronto municipal workers.

A key element in this campaign has been the non-stop anti-worker propaganda pumped out by the big business press and talk-radio stations. In this propaganda offensive, no lie is too outrageous. Workers who strike simply to maintain a status quo contract and resist massive concessions are pursuing "exorbitant" demands.

The multimillion-dollar bonuses and golden parachutes paid failed corporate executives garner barely a peep from the editorialists and columnists at the *Globe and Mail* and *National Post*. But the "greed" and the "selfishness" of garbage collectors who earn \$24 per hour throws them into an apocryphal fit. Meanwhile the recent announcements from the Royal Bank, Scotiabank and Toronto-Dominion that they are once again generating profits of nearly a billion a quarter is cause for a media celebration.

The Toronto and Windsor strikes are part of growing working class resistance to big business' drive to make the working class pay for the crisis of the profit system. Earlier this month, 3,000 workers at Vale Inco in Sudbury and Port Colborne launched strike action against the mining

giant's attempt to slash their pay and impose lower wages for new hires. Auto parts workers in Windsor, Brampton, Toronto, Tillsonburg and Cornwall have organized plant occupations to oppose company attempts to toss them onto the scrap heap without severance pay and even back wages.

But if this resistance is to become a genuine working-class counteroffensive—if it is not to be contained and derailed—it is necessary that workers draw far-reaching conclusions from the bitter reversals the working class has suffered over the past three decades.

Supporters of capitalism, the unions and union-supported New Democratic Party (NDP) have suppressed the class struggle, allowing the big business assault to go unanswered, when not themselves directly imposing job cuts, takeaways and the dismantling of public and social services.

The Canadian Auto Workers, having for decades based its entire strategy on providing the auto makers with a Canadian labor-cost advantage, quickly surrendered before the combined assault of the auto bosses and the federal Conservative and Ontario Liberal governments.

Forced to sanction strikes by Toronto and Windsor municipal workers, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) leadership has done everything to quarantine their anti-concessions struggles and signalled its readiness to surrender the workers' chief demands—in Windsor opposition to a two-tier retiree benefit structure and in Toronto maintenance of the current sick-day program. The union has made no attempt to answer the ruling elite's attempt to make city workers scapegoats for the hardships caused by the economic crisis. But if the city workers' strikes were made the spearhead of working-class opposition to concessions, layoffs and the dismantling of public and social services, there is no question they would rally mass support.

With the full support of the Canadian Labour Congress and Quebec's major union federations, the NDP responded to the outbreak of the economic crisis by rapidly concluding a coalition agreement with the Liberals, the traditional governing party of Canadian big business. Under the NDP-Liberal accord, the NDP and the unions committed themselves to sustaining in office a Liberal-led government committed to an unabashedly right-wing program, including the implementing of Harper's \$50 billion corporate tax cut plan, upholding "fiscal responsibility," and waging war in Afghanistan through 2011.

The perspective historically defended by the unions and the social-democratic NDP that it is possible to secure a decent life for working people under capitalism—through collective bargaining and legislative reforms—has manifestly failed.

The break-up of the post-Second World War boom and the globalization of production fatally undermined the ability of the unions to pressure capital for concessions in the national labor market. With the inter-corporate struggle for profits dramatically intensifying and corporations able to shift production where labor costs, including taxes, were the most lucrative for big business, even the limited traditional resistance of the unions collapsed.

The response of the labor bureaucracies to this new environment has been to integrate themselves ever more completely into corporate management. This has gone hand-in-hand with the promotion of national chauvinism and protectionism, which has served to facilitate the corporate drive to pit worker against worker in a fratricidal competition for jobs.

Nationalism and corporatism are sister pro-capitalist ideologies. The campaigns mounted by the various nationally-based labor bureaucracies to defend "Canadian," "American," or "German" jobs have invariably been combined with the acceptance of major concessions and wage cuts for Canadian and American workers or their counterparts in Asia and Europe

To defend their jobs, wages and rights, workers in Canada and internationally, need a radically new strategy that involves a change in the activity, politics and philosophy of the labor movement. The Socialist Equality Party proposes:

1. Militant industrial action based upon the independent interests of the working class. Workers should answer the attempts of big business and their hirelings in government to make the working class pay for the capitalist crisis by organizing demonstrations, strikes and factory occupations—by reviving the militant traditions of an earlier period that have been suppressed by the trade union bureaucracy.

The SEP calls on workers to form independent rank-and-file factory, workplace and neighborhood committees to organize opposition to the banks, corporations, and governments. Workers should prepare to occupy any threatened plant, store, mine or mill and engage in mass strikes to oppose wage-cutting, social spending cuts, and prevent further shutdowns and layoffs. Such a strategy requires a political and organizational break with the bureaucratically-controlled, pro-capitalist union apparatuses and the creation of new, genuinely democratic forms of working class organization—independent rank-and-file factory, workplace and neighborhood committees.

2. A break with the politics of class collaboration. Industrial action must be linked to a new political strategy: the building of a mass party of the working class so as to fight for the independent interests of working people.

For decades, the unions have promoted the myth that the interests of workers can be advanced through the New Democratic Party, the big business PQ or even the Liberals! These parties, no less than the Conservatives, uphold the interests of the corporations and the banks. Previous NDP governments in Ontario, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and British Columbia have slashed social programs, attacked workers wages and benefits and looked favorably on demands to cut corporate tax rates. Only last month, the NDP government won election in Nova Scotia having won the support of much of the business establishment by promising not to rescind the anti-union Michelin bill and by denouncing the Liberals and Conservatives for being insufficiently fiscally conservative.

3. Rejection of the capitalist market and revival of an international socialist movement of the working class. Workers within Canada and throughout the world are facing the consequences of an economic system whose central principle is the pursuit of private profit—regardless of its consequences for society as a whole. In response to the unfolding crisis of world capitalism, the SEP fights for the socialist reorganization of the economy. This includes the nationalization of the banks and basic industry, placing them under public ownership and the democratic control of the working population, and their operation on the basis of social need, not private profit.

If capitalism is incapable of providing working people with a decent standard of living—and it can't—then working people, those whose collective labor produces society's wealth, must advance their own plan to organize production and employment based on human need, not private

profit and shareholder value.

A revived political movement of the working class must have as its aim the fight for a workers' government, a government of, by and for the working class.

In every country workers face a similar future: rising unemployment, declining wages, economic depression. Workers should reject all forms of nationalism promoted by the trade unions. The crisis of capitalism is a global crisis and the response of the working class to this crisis must be a global response.

The Socialist Equality Party urges workers who agree with this perspective to join the SEP and take up the fight for socialism.



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