

Close to 500 workers at Toronto Nestlé plant enter fourth week on strike

Carl Bronski
28 May 2024

Now entering their fourth week on strike against the multinational Nestlé food processing conglomerate, 461 machine operators, packers, shippers and receivers, general labourers and skilled trades workers rallied last week outside the Toronto, Ontario, confections plant. Members of Unifor Local 252, the workers produce Smarties as well as Kit Kat, Aero and Coffee Crisp chocolate bars.

The strike began shortly after the membership voted by 65 percent to reject an insulting tentative agreement presented to them by local union officials that included a two-year freeze on cost-of-living adjustments. With negotiations now stalled, last Thursday strikers rallied alongside supporters outside the plant to press their demands for a new contract.

The Swiss-based Nestlé corporation is the largest food production and processing company in the world. The company's net worth as of this month exceeds US\$275 billion. Its brand value alone is pegged at US\$22.4 billion. Its annual gross profit for 2023 was US\$47.9 billion, a 6.27 percent increase from 2022. It generates its profits from a global labour force systematically exploited through low wages, often abysmal working conditions and even physical intimidation. In several developing countries in West Africa it has been accused of ruthlessly exploiting child labour and outright use of slave labour on cocoa plantations.

Workers at the Toronto factory have for years fought a continuing battle against Nestlé for decent wages and benefits and against a two-tier system. Prior to the current industrial action, workers struck in 2021, 2017, 2014 and 2001. Currently, full-time permanent workers on the highest wage tier earn C\$25 per hour, which barely meets the living wage threshold (for basic survivability) in one of North America's most expensive cities. Lower seniority workers earn even less in wages and benefits. In addition, about 65 temporary seasonal workers are employed at the poverty level C\$17.20 provincial minimum wage and have no benefits.

The much hated tier system that divides workers and suppresses pay and benefit advancements was negotiated by the union in 2014. After three years working under the

oppressive system, workers struck again in 2017. However, the tiered system has been further entrenched since then.

In the current struggle, the strikers are demanding improvements to the pension plan—which was turned into an inferior defined contributions plan in 2014 for about one-quarter of the workforce and all subsequent new hires. Workers are also calling for wage protections against inflation and the end of the two-tier compensation system. During negotiations, the company has insisted on continuing a freeze already made on cost-of-living adjustments for at least another two years.

The Unifor bureaucracy has systematically isolated the striking Nestlé workers from workers in other sectors across Toronto and the company's large-scale operations across North America. Nestlé proudly boasts on its website that it employs some 33,000 people at 105 locations in Canada and the United States. Of these, 3,700 workers are employed in Canada, including at locations in Brampton, North York, Montreal, Richmond Hill, Etobicoke and Mississauga. But appealing to workers at other locations for concrete support is the last thing on Unifor's mind. It is determined to keep workers confined to the rigid "collective bargaining" regime, because it is from this that the bureaucracy derives its privileges and strengthens its "partnership" with management.

The union's initial presentation of a miserable offer from Nestlé follows similar maneuvers by the Unifor bureaucracy in recent disputes. Unifor's president Lana Payne's record during her first years as head of the union since replacing the disgraced Jerry Dias after a tawdry kickback scandal has set new lows for misrepresentation, double-dealing, abject surrender and betrayal. Significant Unifor strikes at Metro Toronto wholesale grocery warehouses, Windsor Salt and at the Greater Toronto Metro retail grocery stores all showed workers roundly rejecting miserable tentative contracts presented and enthusiastically recommended by Unifor.

In 2022, at the Metro grocery warehouses in Toronto, 900 workers were presented with a virtually identical contract to one they had rejected only the previous week. That "better"

deal simply extended the contract from four years to four-and-a-half years and mirrored the same cut in real wages that had previously been boosted by the union.

The same sleight of hand was performed by Unifor at the defeated Metro retail grocery strike in 2023. There, 3,700 poverty-wage workers overwhelmingly rejected a tentative agreement that union president Payne had gloated was “the best deal in decades.” Five weeks later workers, now hard-pressed to even make their monthly rent, again were presented with a similar contract but now front-loaded and extended from four to five years with real wages by the end of the deal representing yet another cut in living standards. The deal was hailed by union officials as a “historic” victory.

And at Windsor Salt, miners rejected an unanimously recommended Unifor contract after months on strike. After 192 days and starved out, workers finally ratified a new deal that failed to properly address primary job security concerns.

Similarly, Ontario autoworkers are very familiar with the unscrupulous methods used by Unifor to ram through rotten agreements. During the 2020 contract fight, rank-and-file workers presented a well-supported petition demanding that they be given sufficient time to see and discuss full details of any contract before a vote was called. That demand was ignored by the union, despite significant changes due to Electric Vehicle re-tooling downtimes. At General Motors’ CAMI assembly plant, workers were left to rely on food banks after the union-approved support payments for the EV transition ran out during the plant shutdown.

During last year’s auto bargaining, Unifor broke its own rules by ignoring the opposition of skilled trades at Ford to declare a tentative agreement ratified that set the benchmark for yet another round of sweeping concessions.

These betrayals by Unifor are not isolated episodes or primarily the product of incompetent leaderships. Every union throughout the economy—from the Canadian Union of Postal Workers, to the Teamsters, the Canadian Union of Public Employees, and the United Steelworkers—have behaved in an identical way over recent decades: smothering the class struggle and imposing concessions-filled contracts on their members.

This flows from their corporatist alliance with big business and the capitalist state, which has transformed the nationalist union bureaucracies over the past four decades into arms of management and government for suppressing worker opposition to their policies and demands. This alliance has reached a new level under the Liberal Trudeau government, which depends on the union bureaucracy outside parliament and its mouthpiece in the House of Commons, the New Democrats, to enforce its policies of austerity for workers at home and tens of billions to wage war abroad.

Striking Nestlé workers must draw lessons from these betrayals and pursue their legitimate contract demands with the understanding that the nationalist, pro-capitalist union bureaucracy is the main obstacle to their militant struggle and will soon seek to wrap up the strike with a settlement as close to the rejected deal as they can manage. However, conditions are extremely favourable for the development of a broad-based movement in the working class against the persistent attacks of the corporations against their living standards. Some 12,000 Toronto Transit Commission workers are set to walk off the job for the first time in 16 years early next month, while 50,000 postal workers are ready to take strike action as CUPW forces them to continue labouring under an expired contract.

There is great sympathy among Torontonians—and indeed across the country—for the plight of poorly paid workers. Moreover, if they were made aware of the strike, tens of thousands of Nestlé workers across the company’s North American operations and beyond would readily join a common fight against the multinational conglomerate’s enforcement of miserable working conditions to boost corporate profits.

Nestlé workers must immediately organize a rank-and-file strike committee independent of the union apparatus to prevent another sell-out and broaden their struggle to other sections of workers to fight the ruling-class onslaught on working conditions and secure decent-paying, secure jobs for all. This committee must make a special appeal to Nestlé workers around the world to join their struggle by counterposing a global strategy to fight for what workers need to the corporation’s worldwide pursuit of profit.



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