

Talks resume as strike by 9,000 Liquor Control Board of Ontario workers approaches third week

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Contract talks officially resumed Wednesday between management and bargainers from the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) for 9,000 Liquor Control Board of Ontario (LCBO) workers who have been on strike since July 5.

Approaching its third week, the strike is the first walkout in the nearly 100-year history of the publicly owned alcoholic beverage retailer and distributor. All 677 of the LCBO's retail locations across Canada's most populated province have been closed since the strike began, with management personnel continuing to fulfill online delivery orders. LCBO Agency locations in small towns and rural areas also remain open.

The workers, the majority of whom are precariously employed by the Crown Corporation, are demanding job security protections, wage increases to make up for years of surging inflation, and the reversal of concessions enforced by OPSEU in previous contracts.

The main impetus for the strike—which workers authorized by 97 percent in mid-June—is the push by right-wing Tory Premier Doug Ford to privatize the sale of alcohol and thereby transfer the approximately \$2.5 billion in annual public revenue brought in by the LCBO to the coffers of private companies. The principal beneficiaries of this would be the handful of big retailers—Loblaws, Metro, Sobeys, Walmart and Costco—which dominate the grocery market in Ontario.

“Today is about the concrete gains that must be achieved at the bargaining table, directly with this employer, to end the strike that Ford forced by interfering,” OPSEU President JP Hornick said in a statement Wednesday. “This round of bargaining is about what's best for Ontario and our team is focused on the task at hand—we hope the LCBO management team finally is too.”

“Ford never should have forced this strike and should rethink his plan that puts big box CEOs and billionaires before the needs of Ontarians, threatens good jobs and public revenues. It's corporations that will win under his plan, not mom and pop stores or Ontario craft producers,” Hornick concluded.

Ford has repeatedly personally intervened against the striking LCBO workers, eschewing any pretense that this is a mere contract dispute between the LCBO and its workforce, rather than a political and class confrontation between the right-wing government he leads and a significant section of public sector workers.

At the strike's outset, Ford announced an online interactive map which showed where to buy alcohol while the government stores were closed.

With the aim of breaking the strike, Ford and his government have also accelerated plans to allow the sale of ready-to-drink cocktails and 12-to-24 packs of beer at corner stores and large supermarkets. Earlier this year, the Ford government announced a \$255 million payment to private retailer The Beer Store, which is owned by a consortium of big brewers, to break their exclusive right to sell large packs of beer.

In response to the strike, LCBO management announced a plan to reopen a handful of stores for three days a week starting this weekend. But this was scrapped at the beginning of this week, no doubt out of fear the stores could become the target of mass picketing by workers.

Instead, the government has adopted an even more aggressive strikebreaking strategy, by allowing supermarkets to begin selling ready-to-drink alcoholic beverages as of July 18.

Ford has refused to bargain with OPSEU over the issue of expanding the private sale of ready-to-drink cocktails, declaring Monday, “That ship has sailed, we're moving

forward with it.”

The Conservative Ford is building off of the undermining of the public monopoly on alcohol sales which began under Liberal Premier Kathleen Wynne, who approved the sale of beer in grocery stores in 2015 followed by cider and wine in 2016.

The attack on the LCBO workers is seen by Ford and his ruling class cronies as essential to laying down the line and setting the stage for the privatization of other public services. Already, Ford has begun moving locations of the largely privatized ServiceOntario, which provides government document services and approximately \$2.5 billion in annual revenue, into Staples and Walmart stores.

However, the Holy Grail is the province’s public healthcare sector which is seen as a lucrative, largely untapped pool for private profit, with nearly \$190 billion spent in 2022-23. Ford has worked to systematically undermine public health care and open the door to privatization. Ontario spends the least per capita of any province on healthcare while allowing private clinics to offer a broadening array of diagnostic services and surgeries.

Ford and his government see the LCBO as an easy target. They hope to exploit popular support for more “convenience” in buying alcohol to inflict a demonstrable defeat on worker opposition to their privatization agenda and further erode worker living standards. This includes perpetuating a multi-tier wage system under which many LCBO workers earn little more than the minimum wage.

However, an online poll conducted by Leger last weekend found that the LCBO workers maintain broad sympathy, with nearly half of respondents saying they support the demands for increased wages and more permanent positions.

“There is a base of support for the union’s message here, both in terms of the working conditions that they’re trying to fight to improve, and in terms of the role that the LCBO plays in funding public services in the province,” Stephanie Ross, an associate professor in the School of Labour Studies at McMaster University, told the Canadian Press.

Despite this popular support, the OPSEU bureaucracy has done nothing to mobilize the broader working class in the fight to defend public services, let alone its full 180,000 membership across the province, leaving LCBO workers isolated on picket lines spread across Ontario. Beginning under Wynne, OPSEU has acquiesced to every step in the privatization agenda. Instead, it has offered

proposals to help the LCBO increase its revenue, arguing that services can be best maintained and low-wage workers kept under control with the bureaucracy’s assistance.

The vulnerability of the right-wing Ford government was exposed in 2022 when 55,000 education workers struck in defiance of a pre-emptive back-to-work law. The illegal walkout had massive popular support and quickly gave rise to a burgeoning movement for a province-wide general strike to bring down the hated Ford government. In the face of this growing upsurge, the union bureaucracies, including OPSEU, came together to cut a backroom deal with Ford to rescind the legislation and immediately shut down the strike.

Saved from political oblivion by the unions, Ford has felt emboldened to take on the LCBO workers. He is also encouraged by the policies pursued by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his union-NDP-backed Liberal government. The Liberal government has intervened ever more aggressively to break strikes and/or prevent worker job action through back-to-work laws, the threat of them, or arbitrary orders from the Canada Industrial Relations Board. Workers targeted by such action include Canada Post workers, Port of Montreal workers, West Coast longshore workers and most recently WestJet mechanics, and CN and CPKC railway workers.

This assault has—at most—elicited a few complaining squawks from the pro-capitalist unions, which are fully on board with the Liberal government and its agenda of imperialist aggression and war and increased worker exploitation.

The main block to the struggle of the LCBO workers and the development of class struggle in Canada, as is the case internationally, are the union bureaucracies. Workers at LCBO and across Canada can break out of this straitjacket through the formation of rank-and-file committees which can advance and fight for what workers need and not what union bureaucrats, the political hirelings of big business in the establishment parties and corporate executives say is possible. All those who are interested in this fight should fill out the form below to get in touch with the WSWS today.



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