

“CROWN and CORPORATE GREED in CANADA”

Thursday, March 5, 2015

The strike at Crown Holdings' plant in Weston illustrates a major assault on Canadian workers by an American multinational corporation. Greed, callousness and income inequality mark this struggle. More importantly, what happens in the strike will have implications for all of Canada if permanently replacing workers without cause for exercising their right to strike becomes the new employer practice.

For two long winters the 120 Steelworkers have walked the picket line in stubborn refusal to betray the next generation of workers. Despite being recognized as the most productive plant of Crown's North American facilities and doubling its profits, the company rewarded the Toronto employees with a demand that new hires be paid as little as half of the current salary.

The workers said no, and were forced on strike to defend their principled position. Almost as soon as the strike began, the company brought in strikebreakers to run the plant and supply beer and soft drink producers in Ontario and beyond. Each time bargaining resumes the company makes its offer worse. At first, it was purposely vague about how many strikers could come back to work if an agreement was reached. Then, it agreed to drop its demand for two-tier wages, but only if all workers would take up to a 33% cut. Then it stated its intent to keep all the strikebreakers and only hire back two dozen strikers—everyone else would lose their jobs.

Throughout this whole disgraceful episode, the Ontario Government has refused to intervene. The Premier and Labour Minister have been shamefully silent, while a group of Ontario workers whose skills have made huge profits for an American multinational have their livelihoods destroyed. Their story was largely ignored until tragedy struck. On February 27th three year old Elijah Marsh slipped out of his home into the freezing cold night. The next morning the Crown strikers left their picket line to join the search. It was Steelworker David Elines who discovered Elijah, but it was too late to save the boy's life.

Since that fateful day, many more people have heard of the Crown saga. The "bottles not cans" campaign has taken on a new urgency. The raw injustice of the situation offends anyone with a sense of decency. And the failure of the Liberal government to intervene is unforgivable. Labour needs to make this fight a key focus of 2015. It represents everything wrong with the attitude of corporations in Canada. And Crown's aggressive effort to eliminate the union and establish a new, lower paid workforce in Toronto illustrates how the low-wage agenda of the Harper regime is being implemented.

The Crown approach to permanently replace workers engaged in legal strike action will be repeated in many future disputes if this company is allowed to succeed in breaking the union and its contract. Therefore the labour movement has no choice but to change the odds in this crucial fight. That will require an intense focus on pressuring the company, the Ontario government and the elites in Toronto to resolve this dispute with a fair contract and restoration of all workers to the jobs they have fought so courageously to maintain.