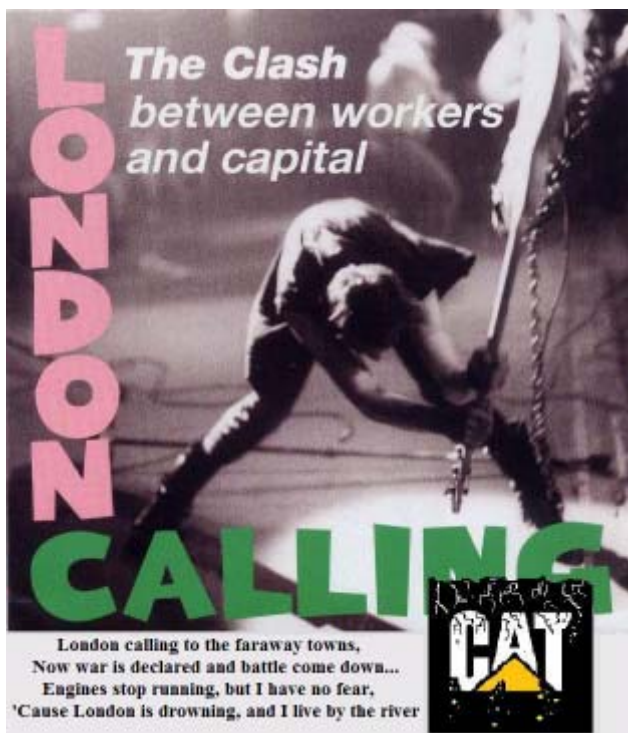


Fight the Electro-Motive Lockout: Move the Struggle Forward

On a bitter cold London, Ontario day on December 11, 1995, tens of thousands of trade unionists and community activists converged in the first of the celebrated Ontario Days of Action. Workers struck employers in a one-day general strike against the attacks on working people by the Mike Harris Conservatives. There was a mass demonstration, feelings of excitement, and a new confidence in a movement that told the government and employers that working people would not allow the province to continue business as usual until the government backed off its horrendous policies.

Today, London is once again a focus of resistance against another series of attacks on working people. This time, it is centred on Electro-Motive and their notoriously anti-union owners, the Indiana-based Caterpillar Corp. The employer is attempting to cut the pay of 465 workers by up to 50%, slash benefits, and eliminate pensions, even though it is making record profits. When the union – CAW Local 27 – refused, it locked out the workers and threatened to move the work to a non-union plant in the US. In response, the CAW has been organizing protests, picketing, and educational activities along with the rest of the London working class community. The Ontario Federation of Labour is organizing its own Day of Action – a mass protest rally for January 21st.

Sid Ryan, the OFL President, said in announcing the rally, “This mass rally is meant to define 2012 as a year of militant resistance against corporate greed...The message for employers is simple: support decent jobs and benefits or it won’t be business as usual.”



To match what we are up against, however, *we can't be labour as usual*. The lockout at Electro-Motive is the latest attack on working people and our unions and is symbolic of the many challenges we now face. What must we do in order to draw a line in the sand and turn the tide in our favour? How might this moment serve as the beginning of a new movement that can respond to the demands of working people across Ontario and the entire continent for decent jobs, income, benefits, and an end to the cynical and seemingly never ending attacks on our livelihoods and futures?

Why is this moment so significant?

Electro-Motive is part of a new and dangerously aggressive round of attacks on both private and public sector workers and working class communities. In the private sector, employers have not only outsourced, downsized, and restructured, but also dramatically reduced compensation levels and working conditions in both unionized and non-unionized workplaces. All of this has dramatically affected worker confidence and contributed to the lowering of union density as a whole.

In the public sector, deficit reduction, austerity, and calls for making our communities “open for business” have brought privatization, cuts to public programs, and have undermined the existence of public sector unions. In Ontario, the Drummond Report sponsored by Dalton McGuinty’s Liberal government outlines a series of measures that will do much of the same on the provincial level. Clearly, this also affects working people in communities, particularly those of us out of work, living on social assistance, or stuck in precarious jobs of one kind or another.

So far, efforts to resist have not been able to turn the tide. Right here in Ontario, three struggles against private sector employers determined to lower the wages and benefits and the pensions of existing and future retirees fell short – at St. Mary’s Cement, Vale Inco, and US Steel. In each case, the local unions (Steel and CAW) mobilized their local communities, raised the issues in labour conventions, and various marches and rallies.

Even the inspiring resistance in Wisconsin that built a new movement was ultimately unsuccessful in rolling back the attacks. The outcome of the upcoming battle in Toronto is unclear.

The current attacks are different in many ways from the previous rounds. They take advantage of capital mobility made possible by free trade. They seem to be centred in employers that have been subsidized by governments, either through negotiated aid deals or other forms of support. The demands of the employers have resulted in either the dramatic weakening or outright destruction of the union and a radical decline in the rights of the workers. They reflect a series of setbacks for the labour movement and have affected the willingness and capacity of workers to organize collective resistance. These attacks have undermined the rights of all working people – from those of us in the better paid jobs, to those of us in precarious jobs, to those of us who are out of work and on social assistance.

But workers across North America are looking for some sense that an alternative is possible. The Occupy movement reminded us all how the 1% continues to reap the benefits of this economic system at the expense of the 99% and that it is possible to mobilize resistance and build support from other working people. It touched a nerve among people looking for some inspiration that we can turn the tide. A fight against the Electro-Motive lockout could be that moment.

Electro-Motive, the CAW and the Labour Movement

At Electro-Motive, the CAW is being targeted with the intense pressure of an anti-union employer looking to make knockout blows against it. This is an opportunity for the union

and the entire union movement to move things in the other direction. This is a place where a strong opposition movement and even victory is possible. The CAW has a strong tradition and experience with some of the key strategies necessary to move forward:

- The CAW was one of the leading forces behind the original Days of Action in the 1990s and many of the key activists who organized and mobilized in those one day general strikes – literally made them happen – are still working in that union. Many work in the London area. The local labour and community mobilization that CAW Local 27 has led is impressive and inspiring. The January 21st Rally - and the ongoing support activities of the local and other activist movements in the city – represent critical steps in building a larger movement. They bring the issue to working people across the province and will engage thousands in building networks of mobilization and education.
- The rally and the work underpinning it could become the foundation of further actions, such as a series of rotating strikes against CAW employers in the London area. This could be a first step in building support strikes from other unionized workplaces there. The OFL could then take this up across the province in much the same way as they did 17 years ago. The original London Day of Action was made possible by the educational and mobilizational work of a stratum of local activists and leadership that can do the same today. The idea is that Caterpillar, the rest of the capitalist class, and the state that underpins it, must be made to realize that we will raise the stakes and make it impossible for them to do “business as usual” until they stop these attacks.
- It is clear that Caterpillar is a diehard anti-union employer. It defeated UAW attempts to stop concessions 30 years ago and is not likely to give up easily. Electro-Motive’s owners need to be defeated politically. That means raising the demand to nationalize the facility, noting that Caterpillar has refused to honour job commitments made when the federal government approved its sale to Caterpillar for \$1.3 billion in 2010. Electro-Motive produces engines that are in demand by major rail companies and could easily become the base for a thriving industry. Demanding that the Federal and Provincial governments take over this company allows the union and the labour movement as a whole to start thinking about building our industrial base in a different way, reducing our dependence on private investors and corporations (foreign or Canadian-owned) – whose only interest is profit, competitiveness, and reducing labour costs. It can provide a direction for moving away from our total dependence on the fortunes of the 1%.
- If the Canadian government can use its power to force Canada Post workers back to work and threaten workers at Air Canada to do the same because their struggles “threatened the economy”, if it can give tax breaks and aid money to private anti-union employers, it can certainly intervene to make sure that one of the country’s key industrial facilities can re-open and operate with well-paid, unionized workers.
- One of the most effective ways to raise the demand for nationalization is if the union organizes an occupation of the plant. The CAW organized an occupation of a Caterpillar plant in Brampton in 1991, demanding decent severance and pension rights. It was one of a series of occupations that the union built in the 1980’s and 1990’s around similar issues. These experiences helped to establish

the confidence of CAW members to take on their employers and galvanized workers behind demands for severance and pension protection. Even though it is clear that the Electro-Motive lockout was meant to prevent an occupation, the union and its allies should be looking for ways to organize an occupation, demanding an end to the blackmail against the membership.

- An occupation or a blockade, could prevent Electro-Motive from moving equipment out of the plant, demonstrating the right of the workers to their jobs and the right of the community to maintain this facility.

None of this can happen unless we see this struggle in a larger context. US Steel, Vale Inco, St. Mary's Cement, and numerous other battles fell short because they were unable to broaden their struggles, move towards forms of strike actions targeting other employers raise and build popular support for political demands, and fuse what started as local struggles with the general desire of working people to stop the war against our livelihoods and futures.

Electro-Motive's actions echo the experience of thousands of working people across the continent: reduced wages and benefits, job loss, cuts to social programs, and attacks against unions. We need to build an educational campaign to provide hope, understanding, and confidence to working people looking for a decent future for themselves, their families, and their communities. Using the experience of the successful GM strike of 1996, when the CAW convinced people across the province that its fight for the principal of "job ownership" was really the fight of all working people, the union and the larger union movement could start such a campaign.

We can develop a movement and a strategy to stop corporations and governments from unilaterally attacking our living standards. We can fight for secure, productive, well-paid, and environmentally sustainable jobs and stand against corporate politicians like Toronto Mayor Rob Ford, Ontario Premier McGuinty, and Canadian PM Stephen Harper and employers like Caterpillar and their allies. Our communities, families and the younger generations are looking for such movements – which helps to explain the surge in support for the Occupy movement's appeal to the 99%.

This kind of education campaign can tap into the growing frustration that working people across the continent are living with, but it needs to be taken up as a larger campaign by the OFL and the rest of the labour movement. A defeat in London would serve to strengthen the confidence of the Rob Fords of the world. But a reversal of the CAT lockout and a successful defence of the livelihoods of the workers would certainly strengthen ongoing struggles, such as those of CUPE municipal workers in Toronto and Quebec steelworkers at Rio Tinto. When government and business use lockouts to announce that working class communities are '*open for business*' we need to fight back by occupying our workplaces and declaring them '*kept open by labour*.'