

December 19, 2019

Ontario Federation of Labour Holds Biennial Convention
Ontario Workers Seek to Strengthen
Resistance to Ford Government's
Anti-Social Offensive

- Steve Rutchinski -



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Convention floor, on day one of the OFL convention, November 25, 2019.

The Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) held its 15th Biennial Convention during the week of November 25-29 at the Sheraton Hotel in Toronto. The OFL represents one million workers organized in 15,000 locals from 54 unions.

The convention was held amid the Ford government's escalating attacks on the working people of the province and the services they provide that the people of Ontario depend on for their well-being. Delegates shared their experiences and discussed the challenge the Ford government's anti-social offensive poses to the well-being of the workers and people of Ontario. The wrecking of the economy through the privatization of public services such as health care, the cuts to jobs, the disregard for the environment, the plight of young workers and other issues of common concern were discussed.

A key feature of the convention was the introduction, discussion and adoption of the Power of Many vision document and action plan which sets the direction of the OFL for the coming period. It calls on workers to establish conditions in Ontario that permit everyone to flourish regardless of status or any other consideration and emphasizes the responsibility of the workers to fight for this. It states that "Doug Ford is a clear and present danger to Ontario. He remains the key adversary to decent work for all, the provinces cherished public services, justice and all working families and their communities." In that vein, it also calls for coalitions to be formed across the province whose aim is to "deliver an NDP government in Ontario in 2021." This raises the question of what it means for the workers to empower themselves, so that they can speak in their own name and realize the pro-social conditions they are fighting for every day, and whether this is the same thing as joining a coalition to elect the NDP.

Ontario workers are preparing for the Ford government to introduce more neo-liberal anti-worker legislation, after it declared the province "open for business" and launched its brutal anti-social offensive. They are paying close attention to the struggles being waged by Alberta workers in the face of such attacks by the United Conservative Party government led by Jason Kenney. One speaker, labour lawyer Joshua Mandryk, noted that workers should be prepared for the Ford government to introduce anti-worker legislation, including legislation to make union organizing more difficult, similar to legislation introduced by the Kenney government in Alberta, which he said is a trial balloon for U.S.-style right-to-work legislation.



One of the panel discussions at the OFL, November 28, 2019, dealt with the fight of workers for safe and healthy workplaces and to get compensation when they are made ill at work.

Injured workers and their collectives brought out the plight of those suffering from workplace injuries and occupational diseases. Natasha Luckhardt, producer of the documentary *Town of Widows*, spoke about the General Electric workers in Peterborough who have died of cancer and other diseases as a consequence of being exposed to asbestos and other toxic chemicals in the plant, and the courageous fight waged by their families for justice and compensation. Janice Martell, the founder of the McIntyre Powder Project, highlighted the need to step up the fight to stop the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB) victimizing and targeting the injured workers it should be helping. She shared the findings of her own inquiry into the health effects of McIntyre Powder, which companies forced miners to inhale from the 1940s to 1970s, allegedly to prevent silicosis. Martell stated that as a result, her father and other miners developed respiratory and other disabling health conditions. To date, the WSIB has refused to recognize their claims.



Janice Martell addresses panel on Occupational diseases, held as part of the OFL convention, November 28, 2019.

The plight of young workers in the "gig economy" was also a topic of discussion at the convention. A panel of young workers shared their experience with the temporary and precarious contract work that many young workers are forced to do to earn a livelihood. Delegates discussed the need to organize these workers into unions to defend their rights.

On November 27, convention delegates held a rally and march to Queen's Park to express their opposition to the Ford government's anti-social offensive against the people of Ontario. Speaker after speaker denounced the Ford government and pledged to step up their united action against it.



OFL delegates march to Queen's Park, November 27, 2019.

Resolutions passed by the convention include ones that expressed support for Ontario teachers and education workers, opposed the plans of the Ford government to privatize ambulance services, called for it to maintain full-day kindergarten, and condemned Canada's involvement in the coup in Bolivia against President Evo Morales.

The delegates elected new leadership, with Patty Coates, an education worker and member of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation, elected the first woman president of the OFL. Ahmad Gaied, a member of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union, was elected Secretary Treasurer, and Janice Folk-Dawson, a member of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, was elected Executive Vice-President. All pledged to lead and step up the fight against the anti-worker and anti-social austerity agenda of the Ford Progressive Conservative government.



New OFL executive (left to right): President Patty Jarvis Coates, Secretary Treasurer Ahmad Gaied, Executive Vice-President Janice Folk-Dawson.

(Photos: OFL)



OFL's Responsibility to Develop the Protest Movement and Take It Further

- Workers' Centre of CPC(M-L) -

The call of the OFL Convention for coalitions to be formed across the province whose aim is to "deliver an NDP government in Ontario in 2021" poses a serious concern for the workers. Since the Days of Action against the Harris government, the OFL wants to run from its responsibility to

develop the protest movement and take it further. It does not want to completely withdraw from the movement but rather orient it towards the fulfilment of the aims of one of the cartel political parties which claims to represent the interests of labour, the NDP. In this respect, the NDP has long since emerged as a disruptive and splittist force in the movement because it pushes its own sectarian aims. While the workers have been rejecting this splittist aim in favour of resolving the crisis in a manner that favours them, the OFL vacillates, trying to steer its focus towards the role of the NDP more than to the role of the trade unions. The NDP has its own self-serving aim, which is to come to power, and it tells the people that the solution is to vote to bring the NDP to power. That is all that they need to do, the people are told.

The aim of the trade unions established in the past, and of their associations like the OFL, was never to radically transform the situation. However, the conditions today are calling for the workers to play a political role by realizing their striving for empowerment so that they can control the decisions which affect their lives. Should the OFL take the movement further than its narrow trade union aim what would be exposed is that the sectarian, disruptive and self-serving role of the NDP is the real problem. It is one of the parties which form a cartel party system to keep the people out of power. It competes to be a force that brokers who will occupy the positions of premier or prime minister, the cabinet ministers, the secretaries and the top echelons of the civil service and so on. This brokering is used to divert the attention of the workers from the need to stick with the aim of their class.



The idea that the working people have a choice between one party and another through elections has been debunked time and time again. The workers want real problems to be solved and detest the splitting of the movement on the basis of party politics.

The workers' movement against the anti-social offensive has an aim which is to defeat the anti-social offensive. This is achieved in a practical way by winning victories for a pro-social program which the working people work out themselves as they are doing every day through the struggles they wage to affirm what belongs to them by right. This aim to defeat the anti-social offensive has to be taken through to the end. It means that as the workers' collectives deliberate on their actions, they must pay attention to not allow the aim of the movement to be put in a secondary position; they should not permit it to be subordinated to narrow aims such as the aim to elect the NDP. Time and again the NDP shows that it is interested in coalitions only so long as such coalitions agree to submit to its aim.

The call of the Workers' Centre of CPC(M-L) is to stick with the aim of the movement. The issue is not whether workers support CPC(M-L) or the NDP or something else. The issue is to realize the aim of the movement.



Quebec Government's Unacceptable, Irresponsible and Provocative Offer

Public Sector Workers Demand Significant Negotiated Improvements to Wages and Working Conditions

- Pierre Chénier -



On December 12, the Quebec government presented its central offer to union representatives in the public sector, as part of the negotiations for the renewal of the collective agreements of some 550,000 public sector workers. These collective agreements expire on March 31, 2020. As soon as the government had tabled its offers, all the unions rejected them as being out of touch with the reality on the ground and insulting to the workers and the demands they have consistently put forward to significantly improve the situation.

The government's offer provides for a seven per cent wage increase over five years, which amounts to at least three per cent less than the inflation rate estimated by experts over the same period. The government is also proposing a lump sum payment of \$1,000 for workers on the job as of March 31, 2020 who will have reached their maximum wage scale limit as of that date. It is estimated that the lump sum, separate from wages, will only apply to around 50 per cent of the workers involved in the negotiations. The government is also proposing to hold three joint discussion forums (of representatives of employers and workers) on educational success, access to care for people in long-term health care facilities or receiving home care and the overall health of public sector workers, where additional funds may be released. Here the government is referring in particular to caregivers and new teachers.

According to the government, the wage offer, the lump sum and the additional funds make up an offer equivalent to inflation, the ceiling it has set for itself in the negotiations in the name of Quebecers' ability to pay and of not increasing the tax burden on future generations. The government has declared that its offer is an acceptable basis for discussion and negotiation with public sector employees.

This offer continues the practice of previous governments in refusing to recognize that public sector workers create immense value for the society, upon which they have a legitimate claim. Workers have the right to a negotiated settlement for their own well-being as well as for that of the public services they deliver. The government is also refusing to admit that the anti-social austerity agenda has brought public services to a breaking point. A feature of this, amongst others, is staff exhaustion, a high level of absenteeism related to sickness which further exacerbates the exhaustion of those who remain at work, and the development of acute mental health problems and psychological distress amongst workers.

Clearly the government is closing its eyes to the fact that insufficient wages are at the heart of the problem of workforce recruitment and retention and therefore of mental health and distress. It has cynically calculated that it will use the power of the state to ensure that the system continues to operate despite the crisis and that public sector workers continue to keep the system going against all odds. The workers do so largely out of dedication to those they care for and to the youth they educate. Fundamentally, the government's attitude is no different from that of previous governments which paved the way for disasters like that in Lac-Mégantic through their refusal to take up their social responsibilities and as a result of their obsession for narrow private profit.

Furthermore, the government's claim that its offer is a starting point for good faith bargaining is false. Good faith bargaining would require a qualitative element, the recognition of the contribution that public sector workers make to society, respect for their dignity and the recognition of their right to negotiated wages and working conditions they deem acceptable. None of this exists in their offer. It therefore is not a basis for negotiation and can only be rejected with contempt.

Workers' Forum joins with the hundreds of thousands of Quebec public sector workers in rejecting this offer in its form and content and demands that the government significantly improve public sector wages and working conditions. On the occasion of the renewal of their collective agreements, *Workers' Forum* is opening its pages to the struggle of public sector workers and will provide relevant information, analysis and views and give pride of place to their voices.

Enough is Enough!
For an Immediate and Significant Improvement in Public Sector
Wages and Working Conditions!

(Photo: CSN)

Interviews

Latest Offer Does Nothing to Make Up for 20 Years of Losses

- Jeff Begley, President, Federation of Health and Social Services (FSSS-CSN) -



Workers' Forum: On December 12, the Quebec government presented its offers to union representatives as part of the negotiation of collective agreements for public sector workers. What is the opinion of the FSSS on these offers?

Jeff Begley: It is clear that the offer is disconnected from the needs in the field. We have problems with employee retention and recruitment, and this problem exists in all categories of work in the sector. The government is saying that it is going to single out contracts for caregivers and new teachers for improvement. However, we just heard the professional orders talking about the problems they have in attracting professionals to the public sector. Those who are completely forgotten here are the people who work on the administrative side, office workers and administrative agents. We never talk about them but there too there is a serious problem of retention and recruitment.

This offer does nothing to make up for what we have lost over the last close to 20 years, and especially since the 2006 negotiation, which was the first negotiation with the Liberal Party. That began with an offer of a zero per cent increase in the first two years. According to us, the sector has lost about 20 per cent over nearly 20 years in terms of inflation. For the people in the administration, we are referring to low-paid workers and if the offer does not keep up with inflation, so they are going to suffer a further loss for another five years if a serious negotiation does not take place.

The other surprising thing is the attempt to sow divisions with this offer. We knew they were going to divide caregivers and new teachers from other public sector employees, but they also offered a lump sum of \$1,000 for those at the top of their wage scale. According to the President of the Treasury Board, approximately 54 per cent of public sector workers are at the top of their wage scale. So there are 46 per cent who will not receive the \$1,000 lump sum. In addition, there are people who have a wage scale with only one level. They could be hired on March 30 and on March 31 they will receive the \$1,000 while others who may have been in the sector for 15 years but are not yet at the top of the scale will not be entitled to the \$1,000. This will sow bickering. The President of the Treasury Board did not explain why he is proposing this. There may be an issue that we do not see, but one thing is certain, whether it is intentional or not, the result will be to divide our people. There are some who are going to be very upset, that's for sure, and rightly so.

WF: The President of the Treasury Board said he had adopted an innovative approach to these negotiations, notably with discussion forums on government priorities for which additional amounts are to be made available. What is your view on that?

JB: On the issue of forums, we haven't finished our analysis but our first reaction is that we have to test what it is they are offering us. We have to participate. There are solutions that would not have the effect of dividing people and we have to see if there will be an opening for that. But if the President of the Treasury Board already has his mind made up, and these are just to get his ideas across, it's not going to go well. If there is an opening to discuss, then there may be ways to resolve some problems but we do not want the goal to be to divide and conquer, like dividing the caregivers and new teachers from the others. It will not pass if that is the government's aim.

WF: Is there anything you want to say in conclusion?

JB: At the FSSS, we have asked for a \$3 an hour wage increase for everyone for the first year, to meet their basic needs. For the employees at the bottom of the scale it is a substantial increase while for the professional at the top of the scale this represents a much smaller percentage increase. At the same time, for the professionals, this amount is important because it lowers the wage gap between those in the public versus the private sector.

I think that in presenting this offer the government did not take stock of the seriousness of the

situation in the public sector. If there is no significant negotiated improvement of our conditions, public sector problems will get worse and it will be the public service as a whole that will suffer once again.

(Photo: CSN)



The Need for More Staff and Improved Wages and Working Conditions

- **Natalie Crytes-Veillette, Quebec Union of Service Employees, Local 298, FTQ** -



Demonstration during the FTQ Congress in support of striking workers in private seniors' residences, November 26, 2019.

This interview was conducted at the 32nd Congress of the Quebec Federation of Labour, November 25-28.

Workers' Forum: One of the salient features of the Quebec Federation of Labour's Congress is the intervention from the most vulnerable health care workers, who are demanding an immediate and significant improvement in their wages and working conditions. Can you tell us more?

Natalie Crytes-Veillette: I myself am a caregiver in a Residential and Long-Term Care Centre (CHSLD) in the Deux-Montagnes region. A major problem is the acute shortage of personnel. At my work place, people are not staying. Many are off sick. Out of some 80 employees, there may be 25 on sick leave. Increasingly, we receive residents who have complex cases. When we are already understaffed and then have to deal with more complex cases, it makes for heavier caseloads and additional hours of care, and we are unable to properly complete our work days and provide the quality care these people deserve.

Fatigue, exhaustion and numerous injuries are very common occurrences amongst employees. They are related to a shortage of staff, combined with the fact that the caseloads are increasingly heavy. Many of our residents require a lift to move them from one position to another, which requires two caregivers working together. More staff are needed. Some people are thinking of leaving and I understand them. There's nothing attractive about the profession at the moment.

Financially, we need better wages. It's a serious problem. I have seven years of seniority at my

workplace and already I'm amongst the 20 people there with the most seniority, out of a total of approximately 80 employees. Better wages are required to address the problem of recruitment and retention. The job deserves better wages. There's a lack of recognition, on the part of government and employers, of the work we do caring for seniors.

Within such conditions, we are unable to provide residents with the services they require. They should be given more time with us. There are residents who, on an individual basis, we don't even get to spend five minutes a day with. These people deserve to have someone there for them. People in positions of authority should leave their offices and spend a day with us on the floor. I once told my Director that what is happening on the floor has nothing to do with my values and that day, I left early. The situation has reached the point that residents are beginning to feel embarrassed about asking us for certain services because they see that we are understaffed. They need us, which is why we keep working at the CHSLD. Although we are not required to do overtime, we sometimes do it for financial reasons, but the main reason we work overtime is out of duty, because the residents need to be taken care of.

Our situation is difficult. Besides caring for the residents lying in bed, we must also take care of the worried or concerned family members accompanying them.

The wages and working conditions of people working in CHSLDs must be significantly improved.

(Photo: FTQ)



Telecommunications Workers on Strike at Ledcor Technical Services in BC

Standing Up for Rights Against Precarious Work

- Brian Sproule -



On December 10, 2019 representatives of the Workers' Centre of CPC(M-L) joined the regular picket line along with a number of retired electrical workers.

Telecommunications workers, members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 213, have been on strike against Ledcor Technical Services (LTS) in Port Coquitlam, BC since September 30. The workers are seeking a first contract. Their main concerns are to put an

end to their precarious job status and improve working conditions, including an end to piece work and recognition of seniority. The company's practice of paying piece rates instead of hourly wages puts pressure on the workers to speed up, thus increasing the danger of accidents and injuries to workers and the public. The piece rates often result in pay that is barely above minimum wage.

LTS is part of the giant multinational Leducor Group, which calls itself a "diversified construction company working to design, build, transport and maintain projects" all over North America. Leducor employs some 7,000 people in several divisions including navigation and aviation. The company claims to treat its workers like "family" but the experience of the technicians in Port Coquitlam tells a completely different story.

In 2017, these workers at LTS joined the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW). At the time of certification of their certification as IBEW Local 213, there were 238 members. By the time a dispute with the company over the makeup of the bargaining unit was resolved, with the Labour Board ruling in the union's favour in January 2019, the company had reduced the workforce to 161. Over the course of 17 days of bargaining, nothing significant regarding the main demands of the workers for an end to piece work rates, precarious employment and dangerous working conditions was achieved. At a union meeting on the evening of August 21, following a rally earlier in the day outside the Leducor offices in Vancouver to demand that LTS bargain seriously with the union, workers voted in favour of strike action. Instead of bargaining seriously with the union, the company carried out a mass layoff of 31 workers on September 25. The union responded with 72-hour strike notice, and on September 30, LTS workers walked off the job and began picketing the LTS office in Port Coquitlam.

The main work of the IBEW Local 213 members is the installation of fibre-optic cable. LTS contracts with various companies, one of the major ones being Telus, to do this work. Telus also has its own employees, members of USW Local 1944, who work on its fibre-optic network. The technicians employed by LTS are paid less and endure working conditions that are significantly inferior to those of the USW Local 1944 members when they perform contract work on the Telus network. In an October 18 statement of support for the striking LTS workers, USW Local 1944 Secretary-Treasurer Michael Phillips said, "When Telus and its contractors are permitted to play 'race-to-the-bottom' with technicians' wages and working conditions, all members lose whether they are USW 1944 or IBEW 213. [...] The less Telus' contractors are paid, the greater the threat that more of our work will be contracted out for cost savings, it's that simple. The better a deal these strikers get, the better a deal we can fight for in our own bargaining with Telus in two years' time." He called on members of his local to assist the striking IBEW Local 213 workers by responding to the request of IBEW Assistant Business Manager Robin Nedila to report any work being done by scabs working for LTS by text to 604-786-0304. Other unions and the Vancouver and District Labour Council have asked members to do the same.

Arrangements like Telus' contract with LTS is a means of undermining the collective of workers, their wages and working conditions. Telus contracts out the work to put pressure on its employees to moderate their demands for wages and working conditions that are acceptable to them. LTS and other contractors pay substandard wages and try to claim that their workers are "independent contractors" and not employees to avoid basic labour and safety standards and impose a regime of precarious work. This *modus operandi* of the monopolies is becoming all too common and requires that workers step up their organizing, their resistance, and their solidarity. *Workers' Forum* stands with the LTS workers who, in defending their rights, are defending the rights of all.



Interview

Gino Ocampo, IBEW Local 213 Picket Captain



Solidarity picket at Ledcor Main Office in Vancouver in support of IBEW 213 members on strike against Ledcor Technical Services, November 21, 2019.

Workers' Forum: We are on the IBEW 213 picket line in Port Coquitlam on December 10. What can you tell us about your fight for a first contract?

Gino Ocampo: In November 2017 we were granted certification from the Canada Industrial Relations Board. Negotiations were breaking down so we had mediation as well but the company wouldn't sign anything, even the union's basic human rights language. When the bargaining committee asked for a strike vote 79 per cent of us voted to strike. Shortly after that 31 of our colleagues were called randomly by their managers and told "Hey, you have to report back to the office. We have an update for you." So 31 of them walked in. They were asked to give their keys and company vehicles back, and the managers told them, basically, "get lost." Taxis were waiting to take them out. They were told "This is your last day, Sorry, we have no work for you." and that was the end of it. Most of our guys were scratching their heads, thinking "What did I do? What's going on here?"

This is day 70 of our strike. To date we have seen Ledcor Technical Services (LTS) opting to go for subcontractors instead of negotiating with us. Telus is subcontracting to LTS and LTS is subcontracting to others. They are being paid piece rate as well. They are not paid an hourly rate. They are all called self-employed. That's the way the industry is evolving right now, contractors and more contractors.

WF: Is Telus the main contractor for LTS work?

GO: Yes. Shaw is big here in the Lower Mainland but they do have unions entrenched in their company. They are more secure than we are. They are not allowed to hire subcontractors if they lay off their union employees. [...]

Ledcor has a corporate office in downtown Vancouver. That's where the main BC office is. We have had rallies there and we basically divided the picketing crew into two groups. One group in Coquitlam and the others, that live on the other side of the bridge, picket the main office. We rotate between morning and afternoon. We picket eight hours a day and everyone is welcome.

WF: What support do you have and what can people do to support you?

GO: Lots of people drop off hot coffees and cocoa from time to time which helps us. We are fighting for our rights and we appreciate the general public giving us whatever support they can. [...] The mayor visited us once, the President of the BC Federation of Labour came, and some councillors came to show support. We asked them to post pictures and information on their webpages or Facebook accounts to help to spread the word. We are not a big union. Given the current disputes going on in BC we are being overlooked, so nobody knows about our strike here.

We are asking people who are Telus customers and need technicians, please do not let a LTS contractor in, a LTS non-union employee. If you are a Telus subscriber do not let any Ledcor technicians into your place until we get a fair agreement. Telus has their own in-house technicians who are unionized, represented by United Steelworkers, but most of this work is being subcontracted. That's the nature of their business. It's a process of downgrading the union power. They are finding ways to get around the union workforce.

With Ledcor we work on a piece-work basis. If we don't work we don't get paid. Right now the health benefits of most of the strikers have been cut off because we are on strike. We are getting basically minimum wages right now with strike pay, without any health benefits, so we are left to our own devices. Most of us are in a really precarious state right now. Most of us, as you can see, are immigrants. That's what the big companies are doing right now. Hiring newcomers into Canada so that when you get rid of them no one will complain. I came to Canada 11 years ago and have seen that unions get a bad rap. I have seen the rank and file go down, having bad press. We're just fighting for basic human rights of better wages, better living conditions. [...]

We are skilled workers. We were trained by the original Telus employees, for months on end, and we are basically the best of the group. The people you see here are the ones that are left, they couldn't get rid of us that easily because we are the highest performing technicians...

The three big companies have a monopoly. A couple of years ago a U.S. company wanted to enter Canada, ads were on the TV saying be patriotic, don't let any other companies get into Canada, it will destroy the Canadian industry. But what are they doing to us? They are taking advantage of their workers. They are taking advantage of their customers. Something has to give.

WF: How many workers are on strike, how many are employed by Ledcor?

GO: We are several hundred, divided into different departments. We have the technicians and we have what we call the MxU, the built-in. What happened to the built-in is they were part of our collective and they were part of the strike vote. They voted yes. But when the union asked for the actual strike they opted to cross the line, so our number was diminished from 100 plus, we are now left with just over 60. So that's a big blow for us, seeing our colleagues cross the picket line. It really hampers our power to negotiate. As you can see on the information board, 48 per cent are on strike and 52 per cent are working because they already laid off 31 of us. You should be on the right side of history when you are writing your own history. Will you be that guy that stabbed your own colleague in the back or will you be the one who stood up and fought for your colleagues? That's why we are asking people to tell Telus that they won't allow an LTS technician into their home.

(Photo: R. Nedila)

Note to Readers

This is the last issue of *Workers' Forum* for the year. We will resume publication on January 15, 2020.

In the meanwhile, please continue to visit CPC(M-L)'s website for up-to-date information and take a look at the *TML Daily* 2019 Photo Reviews on the fight of the workers, women, youth, and Indigenous peoples, speaking and acting in their own name to uphold the rights of all and make Canada a zone for peace.

The year 2019 saw increased militancy from workers in Alberta, Ontario, Quebec and elsewhere in openly challenging the wrecking agenda and brutal assault of the rich and their governments against the people and their society, in all aspects of life. Workers are developing ways to make their stand that *No! Means No!* effective against this onslaught, marshalling their ranks and mobilizing public opinion to block this attack and open the door to the progress of society. Life is telling us that the time to develop the independent politics of the working class to withstand this onslaught is now! The workers require their own thinking and actions based on analysis so as to resolve the crisis in their favour.

We wish you all a safe and happy year end.

Workers' Centre of CPC(M-L)



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