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Negotiate! Don't Dictate!

Spirited Rally and Day of Action in Support of Striking Salt Workers in Windsor



- **Negotiations Yes! Extortion No!**

– *Enver Villamizar* –

Video

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Spirited Rally and Day of Action in Support of Striking Salt Workers in Windsor

A solidarity rally held on June 29 for striking Windsor Salt workers was attended by workers from various sectors in Windsor-Essex, including many represented by Unifor in the area's automotive sector. There were also active and retired teachers and education workers, city workers, federal and provincial public service workers, nurses and community members. Joining them were Unifor members and retirees from other parts of Ontario, including Sudbury's Mine Mill union as well as salt miners from Goderich. A delegation of three workers who came all the way from Windsor Salt's operations in Pugwash, Nova Scotia to show their solidarity also joined the rally, bringing

with them a Unifor flag signed by their co-workers in the mine expressing the unity of the Windsor Salt workforce in Pugwash with those on strike in Windsor.



Roxanne Dubois, Executive Assistant to Unifor National President Lana Payne, welcomed everyone. "We're here today to recognize the courage and resilience of all of the Unifor members who have been on strike for four months now," she said. "We're also here to show that we are going to stick together side by side for these members on strike until a fair collective agreement is reached," she added.



Jodi Nesbitt, President of Unifor Local 240, who represents the clerical staff at both the mine and the evaporation plant in Windsor spoke next. She thanked Local 240's bargaining committee and the bargaining committee of the miners and production workers of Unifor Local 1959, recognizing their hard work as well as the support they have received from their national union. She thanked too the working people of Windsor-Essex and their unions along with small businesses and activists who have supported the workers by joining them on the picket lines, dropping off food, and making substantial financial contributions.

"Without those donations I could tell you, it would make a difficult time a lot more difficult," she said. She thanked specifically Lisa Gretzky, the Member of Provincial Parliament for Windsor West, the riding where the evaporation plant is situated, as well as teachers and education workers for their constant support. She appealed to the politicians in attendance to support the workers and to visit the picket lines. In closing, she addressed everyone, saying, "Our fight is all of our fight. And without each and every one of you, it makes it much harder. So, we're going to be in this together with all of you."

Bill Wark, Unifor Local 1959 President, also thanked those who took the time to attend. "It's been incredibly difficult, but the commitment that these workers show is unrivaled," he said. "We will remain strong as long as it takes." He specifically thanked miners from Goderich, Sudbury and Pugwash for joining the rally and expressed how much it meant to the workers in Windsor that they came to support them.





Unifor National Secretary-Treasurer Len Poirier spoke next. "Going on strike is a right in Canada and we will always fight to do that," he pointed out. He said that Unifor's National Office and all of its member locals support the workers on strike and will be there until a deal is reached. He made a special point of thanking Unifor retirees who had come by bus from other southern Ontario cities to join the rally.

Unifor's Ontario Regional Council Executive Vice-Chair, Brian Chapman, followed. He re-iterated the support of Unifor and announced that the Ontario Regional Council was donating \$15,000.

Rob McKellar, President of Unifor Local 823, representing workers at the Windsor Salt mine in Pugwash, Nova Scotia shared his members' experience with Stone Canyon. "Since they bought us, the company has decimated our workforce. Our numbers are at the lowest I've ever seen," he said. When the workers found out about the rally in Windsor they knew they had to do something, he said, so they decided to send a delegation. "This is why we have come here in full support," he added, showing the consciousness among the salt workers that they are in one fight with a foreign union-busting firm, and that they stand as one.



Former National President of the Canadian Auto Workers, Ken Lewenza, who is from Windsor, addressed the rally next. He saluted the salt workers who he said are making incredible sacrifices, not just for themselves but for the labour movement and the rights of workers to make progress, not go backwards 50 or 60 years. "My message to the employer today is you will not starve these workers out! We will come up with a mechanism that union solidarity isn't just words. Union solidarity is about making sure workers can pay their bills, pay their mortgages and take care of their children. That's going to take a United Fund from all

members of Unifor moving forward so we have to work on that," he said. He called on all the elected officials in attendance to use their influence to tell the provincial government that, if they truly want to improve labour relations in Ontario, they should use the power of government to tell Stone Canyon that they must get back to the bargaining table and negotiate in good faith.

MPP Lisa Gretzky, who spoke next, recognized the other elected officials in attendance from the City of Windsor, Essex County and the provincial government. "We need politicians who don't just show up for photo-ops. We need politicians who are willing to go after the governments at all levels to make them do the right thing," she said. She called on the Progressive Conservative MPP for Windsor-Tecumseh, who was also at the rally, to support NDP legislation which would regulate when and how scab labour can be used in a strike.[1] "You have people going in and doing the work of these workers and until that anti-scab legislation is passed, it is not a fair and free collective bargaining process, the power lies with the employer," she said.





Unifor National President Lana Payne closed the rally, thanking everyone who came to support the workers on strike, especially those from out of town. She thanked the Ontario teachers' unions for their ongoing demands that the Ontario Teachers' Pension Plan use its investments in Stone Canyon and seat on its Board of Managers to uphold the striking salt workers' rights. She addressed the state of negotiations and how the strike will end. "Our members will not be starved out. Our members will not be brought to their knees. They are going to get a fair collective agreement, come hell or high water, and they're going to walk

back into that mine and walk back into that mill with pride and with their heads held high. That is the way this is going to end," she said to resounding applause.

"Unlike the employer, we're not going to be bargaining in public. They tried to do that this week by releasing part of an offer to the entire world. So let me be clear. Our members were not born yesterday. They see these tactics for exactly what they are – a doomed attempt to come between the membership and their leadership. Not on our watch, not in our union. Not today, not ever will this happen," she said. She directly addressed the company saying that the workers will not conciliate with union-busting tactics. "We will all stand together until our members get a fair deal that they can support, and until then, all of Unifor will be with them -- today, tomorrow, as long as it takes!" she said in closing.

In addition to those who attended the rally in Windsor, workers across Canada participated in the Day of Action by posting pictures of themselves standing in solidarity with the Windsor Salt workers in their workplaces. The rally and social media actions show the growing consciousness that the stand of Windsor Salt workers to say *No!* is of significance to the entire labour movement and must be supported.







Unifor members in Ontario participate in Day of Action in support of Windsor Salt workers

Note

1. Ontario NDP's Anti-Scab Legislation, *Workers' Forum*, Enver Villamizar, April 18, 2023.

(Photos: Unifor)



Negotiations Yes! Extortion No!

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On June 27, two days before a major rally called by Unifor in Windsor, Ontario to support striking salt workers, Stone Canyon Industries Holdings Inc. (SCIH) issued a news release. The U.S. company that owns Windsor Salt claimed that negotiations with the unions representing striking Windsor Salt workers had collapsed because one of the unions "renewed" on an agreement the company thought had been reached with it on "certain critical issues." It also claimed to have no

intention of contracting out union jobs, implying that the workers, for no reason, want to stay out on strike day after day – something too ridiculous to merit even scoffing at.

Representatives of the striking workers indicated they were unaware of the collapse of negotiations, highlighting that the company had once again arbitrarily walked away from the negotiations. This grandstanding by company amounts to extortion, the practice of obtaining something through force and threats. In a public statement Unifor responded to the company's action saying that its tactics to divide the ranks of the workers are doomed to fail. It then posed the most pertinent question -- that the company clearly knows there are unresolved issues at the bargaining table, and should work with the union to resolve them instead of engaging in divide-and-conquer tactics.

Based on its recent purchases of facilities in Canada, the U.S. and Chile, Stone Canyon boasts that it is the biggest producer of salt in the world. That may or may not be true, but even amid this ongoing strike the company is expanding its wells and pipelines to extract greater amounts of salt brine at Malden Park, which is owned by the City of Windsor. The City Council has granted various abatements for public lands to facilitate this expansion. The project commenced in January and, as indicated on their signs, it is scheduled to continue until September. The City of Windsor had also granted Windsor Salt's previous owner the right to expand production deeper down in the rock salt mine. Clearly, production facilities are being expanded.



Construction in Malden Park, Windsor, Ontario to expand pipeline network and brine wells for extracting and transporting salt brine to Windsor Salt's evaporation plant

It is noteworthy that this is happening at a time of major developments relating to the use of salt for electricity storage and production. Among all of its other critical uses, sodium from sodium chloride is a key ingredient in producing what is called green energy. This includes new plans for its use in batteries for electric vehicles. Sodium-ion batteries are being developed as a cheaper and safer alternative to lithium-ion batteries for both electric vehicle batteries and for stationary units. Battery storage is the lynchpin of the electrification of the economy taking place at this time.

Without ways to store the energy generated from renewable sources such as wind and water, wind and water power are of only intermittent use. Battery storage will provide stability to electrical grids and permit the expanded use of electricity in all aspects of our lives, including for electric cars.

Sodium-ion batteries from salt hold potential because they are effective at both very high and low temperatures. They do not catch fire as readily as lithium-ion batteries which, by all accounts, has become a serious problem. Molten sodium chloride salt is also used in the production of electricity from small-scale nuclear reactors which those investing in a green economy are also interested in building.

Salt is also a lot cheaper than lithium and it is a readily available resource in many countries including Canada where there are mines in Windsor and Goderich, Ontario, Pugwash, Nova Scotia, Iles de la Madeleine, Quebec and elsewhere. The salt workers in these places are all supporting this strike.

Teachers in Ontario are eager to see our pension fund, one of the largest sources of investment capital in the world, used to advance a green economy. But why should this be done at the expense of the workers without whom nothing can be produced? This is currently the case with its major investments in SCIH. Teachers will never accept their pension fund being used by governments or private companies that consider the workers to be expendable, dispensable and disposable.

The world needs investments in this new technology to enable mass-scale expansion. As teachers who devote our lives to nurturing a healthy young generation to guarantee a healthy future for society, we are not opposed to investing our pensions in new and emerging technologies which have great potential to benefit society. However, we take issue with investing our pension monies in a company engaged in extortion.

So what is SCIH trying to obtain through force and threats? The objective of this U.S. holding company is to further increase its profits by removing any obstacles hindering its exploitation of a valuable and critical Canadian resource. This includes stable unionized jobs that uphold high health, safety, and quality standards. The company aims to accomplish this through contracting out and other changes to work rules, which it refers to as "flexibility." Under such arrangements, workers are expected to compromise the high standards they have developed over generations to sustain production.

As teachers, we have experienced similar rhetoric about "flexibility." During the pandemic, we were expected to be "flexible" regarding our health, safety, and working conditions, while the government made daily announcements about our working conditions without consulting or negotiating with us. We are not against being flexible, but we are against union-busting and dictate because our working conditions are students' learning conditions. Through conversations with salt workers on the picket line, we have learned that the company's notion of flexibility involves pushing workers and machines to their breaking points solely to achieve favourable numbers and personal gain, regardless of the consequences for people, production, the city, and the country. In other words it is not sustainable and is rightfully being rejected by the workers.

SCIH must stop its extortion racket and respect the workers' right to decide their wages and working conditions. Teachers are determined to make sure our Pension Plan is not used to finance causes which go against the interests of the workers and our country. Salt is a valuable resource and our workers are invaluable to us. SCIH should smarten up and stop prolonging this strike with its extortion tactics. The more they persist, the more teachers will advocate for our demand that our pension funds not be invested in union-busting and anti-social companies.

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Video

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