

Canada: Liberals adopt emergency law to end federal workers strike

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The Liberal government rushed emergency legislation through Parliament last week to put an end to a campaign of rotating strikes by the federal government's 14,000 blue-collar workers.

After Treasury Board President Marcel Massé tabled Bill C-76 in the House of Commons, the Public Service Alliance of Canada signalled its readiness to accept the government's last contract offer and a tentative agreement was soon reached. Nevertheless, the Liberal government decided to proceed with the strikebreaking legislation, because it feared the blue-collar workers might overturn the deal in a ratification vote.

Since January the workers, who work for several ministries including Public Works, Defence and Transport, have mounted a campaign of rotating walkouts. On several occasions, as when they blockaded a highway near Montreal's international airport, PSAC strikers were attacked by police.

The workers have not had a wage increase in seven years. They have also been agitating for the scrapping of the government's zone system under which workers in different parts of the country are paid at different rates for doing the same work. In some cases the wage differential is as much as \$2 per hour.

The PSAC leadership adopted the rotating strike strategy, claiming it would make it more difficult for the government to strip the blue collar workers and other federal workers of their collective bargaining rights in the current round of contract negotiations. In 1991 the Tory government used emergency legislation to break a strike by more than 100,000 federal workers.

Predictably, the union leadership's policy of keeping the membership on a leash only encouraged the Liberal government to intervene when job action began to have a significant impact on the federal government's operations. At first, the Liberals showed little interest in ending the dispute. But when grain handlers walked off the job,

holding up millions of dollars in grain shipments, and Revenue Canada workers joined the walkouts, the government's attitude changed. Suddenly, the rotating strikes were a "threat to public security." In justifying the back-to-work legislation Prime Minister Jean Chretien also cited the fact that most federal government workers, including the bulk of the PSAC membership, have already accepted negotiated contracts. "It's time to act," declared Chretien, thus reducing workers' democratic rights to a question of administrative efficiency.

The tentative agreement reportedly reduces the number of work zones from seven to three and provides for a total wage increase of around 5 percent, meaning that at the end of the decade the blue-collar workers will be paid significantly less than they were in 1991, in real terms.

The Liberals' parliamentary opponents have noted that Bill C-76 sets new precedents for federal back-to-work legislation. In addition to suspending blue-collar workers right to strike and authorising the government to impose a new collective agreement on them by decree should they reject the tentative pact, Bill C-76 empowers the government to strip some 700 federal prison guards, also PSAC members, of the right to strike, even though the guards had not undertaken any job action when the bill was first tabled. (Most of the 5,100 federal prison guards have been designated "essential workers" and are thus legally barred from striking.) Bill C-76 also allows the government, if it so chooses, to dictate the prison guards' contract. Previous federal laws suspending collective bargaining rights have either provided for a purportedly independent arbitrator to impose a contract settlement or stipulated the terms of a new collective agreement, thus at least formally making them subject to parliamentary scrutiny.

Bill C-76 threatens the blue-collar workers with individual fines of up to \$1,000 a day if they continue their campaign of rotating strikes. Union leaders can be

fined up to \$50,000 per day of defiance and the union up to \$100,000 a day. The heavy penalties indicate that the government was concerned the back-to-work order might be disobeyed. Some workers, such as the hospital service workers, have not had a negotiated settlement since 1985 and have been legislated back to work in three successive rounds of contract negotiations.

Hundreds of thousands of public sector workers across Canada, including 400,000 Quebec provincial public sector workers and 50,000 Ontario hospital workers, are currently renegotiating their contracts. Those currently on strike include 4,500 Newfoundland nurses and 2,000 radio and television technicians at the government-owned Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

In the name of eliminating budget deficits, governments across Canada--whether Liberal, Tory, New Democrat or Parti Québécois--have imposed pay cuts and wage freezes and increased workloads on public sector workers. The Liberals' strong stand against the blue-collar workers is clearly intended as a message to both the working class and big business. Governments may now be running budgetary surpluses, but austerity for government workers, and by implication all workers, is to continue.

Meanwhile, those who staff the state's repressive apparatus are being awarded by the Chretien government with pay increases substantially higher than those given the federal workers. Although the Liberals resisted amending Bill C-76 to this effect, Massé has assured the prison guards that the government will accept as the basis for a contract settlement a conciliation board report that recommended they be awarded increases of between 12.5 and 14.2 percent over two years. The same day that Parliament adopted Bill C-76, the Chretien government announced pay raises of between 14.4 and 18.1 percent for military personnel.



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