

Union hobbles Canada-wide federal workers strike

Lee Parsons

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One-hundred-and-twenty-five thousand federal government employees went on strike Tuesday morning, launching one of the largest job actions in Canadian history. However, representatives of both the Liberal government and the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) were quick to claim that the strike will be short-lived.

Even as workers at some 70 federal government departments walked off the job, the PSAC leadership was working to blunt the strike's impact, announcing that government and union negotiators had reached, or were on the verge of reaching, tentative agreements for a number of bargaining units, including those comprising the 5,000 Parks Canada workers who have spearheaded the federal workers' contract fight. Declared PSAC President Nycole Turmel, "We're not talking about weeks here, we're talking about hours and days."

With as many as 40,000 workers off the job in Ottawa, Canada's capital is the city most affected by the strike. But PSAC picket lines dot the country from coast to coast.

Some 30,000 PSAC members, whom the government has stripped of the legal right to strike by designating them as "essential employees," are, at the PSAC's urging, continuing to work. Nevertheless, the strike has disrupted a broad range of government agencies and functions, including Employment Insurance, Canada Pension, Old Age Security and passport offices. In a gesture aimed at garnering public support, the government has given assurances that there will be no interruptions in the issuing of employment insurance and pension cheques. To date, no major picket-line confrontations have been reported, although workers in Montreal did occupy the main government complex in the downtown area on Tuesday, forcing the closure of

the local passport office.

Invariably the corporate media depicts the federal government workers as privileged fat cats, who unlike their counterparts in the private sector are not "disciplined" by market forces. The truth is very different. Since 1975, when the Trudeau Liberal government introduced wage controls, public-sector workers—at both the federal and provincial levels—have repeatedly been subjected to wage freezes and government austerity.

As for the federal workers' much-touted job security, it is increasingly threatened by government cutbacks, the burgeoning practice of contracting out and other forms of creeping privatization. In this month's Throne Speech, the Liberals recommitted themselves to holding the line on government spending and to "rethinking" the way government works, a euphemism for so-called public private partnerships (PPPs) and outright privatization. The government's budget projections are predicated on the Liberals' eliminating C\$3 billion of "low-priority" government spending in each year of the next four years.

Treasury Board President Reg Alcock, who covets the title of the government's most tenacious fiscal conservative, has let it be known that the Liberals stand ready to legislate an end to the federal workers' strike. The last major strike undertaken by the PSAC, a walkout in 1991, ended with the Tory government of Brian Mulroney using strikebreaking legislation to force 100,000 workers back on the job and imposing on them a three-year contract that cut their real wages.

The Liberals, who were reduced to a minority government in last June's federal election, would prefer, however, to wind up the strike with the assistance of the union bureaucracy. Negotiations were restarted last week with the help of the Canadian

Labour Congress. The social democrats of the New Democratic Party (NDP) are also anxious to bring about a settlement. Back-to-work legislation would cast a pall on their claims that the minority Liberal government of Paul Martin is a “progressive” alternative to the Conservatives of Stephen Harper.

By the end of the first day of the strike, the union had announced a return to work of 10,000 civil servants, including maintenance staff, ship crews and firefighters, with wage increases of just over 2 percent a year. In a further capitulation, on the same day the strike began, PSAC negotiators brokered a deal for 5,000 Parks Canada workers who have been on strike since early August. That agreement includes wage increases of between 2.25 and 2.5 percent in each year of a four-year deal, retroactive to August, 2003—well short of the wage hikes the union had been seeking to achieve parity with the private sector. The PSAC had been seeking increases of as much as 3 percent a year, while the Treasury Board began negotiations with an offer of 5.75 percent over three years.

Although there is much evidence to show that there is great popular concern about the deteriorating state of public and social services and increasing wariness if not outright hostility to the tax-cutting and privatization rhetoric of the right, there was never any question of the PSAC and its allies in the CLC and NDP making any genuine appeal to working people to support the federal workers. Rather, the PSAC workers have been held tightly within the narrow, stultifying framework of collective bargaining.

The Liberals justify their hard-line bargaining position and privatization push by arguing that the federal government is under severe financial pressure. But this is belied by Wednesday’s announcement that in the fiscal year 2003-2004, the federal government ran up a budget surplus in excess of C\$9 billion.

Since coming to power in the fall of 1993, the Liberals have fundamentally re-jigged federal finances, with the aim of permanently rolling back public and social services and redistributing income from the poor and working people to the well-to-do and owners of capital through massive tax cuts. One part of this process has been to systematically underestimate federal revenues, then funnel the surpluses into paying down the national debt.



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