

Lockout at the CBC—“Canada’s public broadcaster”

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The lockout of 5,500 journalists and technicians at the federal government-owned Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) threatens to be prolonged. Taking its cue from the corporate media giants and Canada’s Liberal government, CBC management is seeking to impose a new business model in which an ever-larger proportion of its employees will be contract workers with little or no job security.

The lockout, which began August 15, affects the CBC’s English-language radio, television and Internet broadcasts in all parts of the country except Quebec and the predominantly French-speaking region of New Brunswick, where other collective agreements are in force.

The dispute at the CBC has significance beyond its immediate socioeconomic impact for it concerns an institution that plays a pivotal role in promoting the Canadian national identity that underpins official politics and the current socioeconomic order.

Canada’s neo-conservatives have long railed against the CBC. They accuse it of wasting gobs of money in promoting liberal, even socialist views, and of cultural elitism. The neo-conservatives resent that the reins of state control over the CBC were loosened, starting in the 1960, so as to allow for a limited, but nonetheless significantly broader range of criticism and experimentation than that tolerated at the corporate-owned television and radio broadcasters. Reducing, if not eliminating, government support for the CBC and thereby rendering it more dependent on advertising and sensitive to big business pressure is for these forces a means of stifling a discordant voice.

The media conglomerates like Canwest/Global, which provide a platform for the neo-conservative ideologues, also resent the competition from the state-subsidized CBC. Twelve of the top 20 Canadian drama series and 18 of the top 20 Canadian drama specials in 2003-2004 were

CBC programs.

The Liberals under Chretien and now Paul Martin, while continuing to uphold the need for a state broadcaster dedicated to touting a Canadian—i.e., Canadian nationalist—viewpoint, have substantially reduced funding for the CBC over the past decade and increasingly accommodated themselves to the right’s call for a CBC that eschews esthetic and intellectual standards in pursuit of advertising revenues and audience share.

Angered by the lockout and CBC management’s indifference to providing an alternative source of news, a number of locked-out employees started last week to develop their own programming, beginning with small Internet blogs and local radio broadcasts. This has since taken a more organized form, with about 150 writers and announcers as well as some producers launching an alternative national news broadcast that they hope will soon move from the Internet to radio. Much of this alternative reporting can still be found at <http://cbcunplugged.blogware.com/blog>.

This turn of events is due in part to the diverse range of those involved in the contract battle with the CBC. Members of the Canadian Media Guild (CMG), the locked-out CBC employees, include both ordinary technical staff and well-known on-air journalists and announcers. Several of the latter, including Barbara Budd, Gillian Findlay and Andy Barrie, have placed themselves at the centre of the contract fight, saying that they fear for the future of public broadcasting in Canada.

Ignoring the Liberals’ role in slashing the CBC’s financing and even more importantly, their open promotion of privatization, public-private partnerships and contracting out as means a of making the Canadian economy “more competitive,” the Canadian Media Guild is urging its members and the public to focus their energies on lobbying the government to press CBC management to moderate its concession demands.

Writing in the *Toronto Globe and Mail*, Arnold Amber, president of the CBC branch of the CMG, proudly pointed to the Guild's record of never initiating a work stoppage in 53 years at the CBC and appealed to management for a "real partnership."

In July, CMG members at the CBC voted 87.3 percent in favor of strike action after 15 months of unsuccessful contract talks, during which the CBC sought to gut provisions governing job security.

That the CBC was intent on a confrontation became clear when it issued a virtual ultimatum on August 9 stating that unless the Guild accepted a provision to exclude entire classifications of workers from the contract, it would not continue negotiations.

While the CMG has focused public attention on the dispute over job security, CBC management has attempted to downplay its significance by pointing to 40 other outstanding issues. CBC management nevertheless argues that it needs greater leeway in using contract employees if it is to have the flexibility to compete in an evolving industry. It contends that only 5 percent of work at the broadcaster is presently contracted out.

The Guild vigorously contests this claim. It says 30 percent of CBC staff is already working on a contract or non-permanent basis—a higher proportion than at its television competitors CTV, Global and the CHUM group—and that if the CBC's demands are adopted, the percentage will rapidly increase toward 50 percent.

Such a situation, the Guild warns, will not only affect the economic and psychological well-being of its members. It will affect the way the CBC reports the news. Wrote one Guild member, "Any new hires will start worrying about whether the story they are doing might affect their chances at contract-renewal. Could it ruffle the feathers of somebody rich and powerful, somebody with influence and access. I am afraid that insecurity will inevitably lead to the worst form of dictatorship we see in a western democracy—self-censorship."

The CBC has continued to broadcast throughout the lockout, using management staff to supply abbreviated news broadcasts and supplementing these with material and entire programs from the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). This has provoked a storm of protest from organizations such as the National Union of Journalists (NUJ), representing reporters in Britain and Ireland. The NUJ has condemned the BBC, saying it is complicit in the CBC lockout.

Among the other sticking points in negotiations are wages and benefits. The CBC has proposed that overtime

be ~~insulated over~~ ^{insulated over} a four-week term, which the Guild has flatly rejected. Few details are available on the issues of wages, although the CBC has offered a general increase of 2 percent per year retroactive to April 2004. That offer has also been rejected by the CMG.

This is the third lockout at the CBC in seven years, but this is by far the largest and most contentious. The CBC's English-language service has closed all its offices except those in Toronto, Ottawa and Iqaluit in the northern territory of Nunavut.

The CBC is a crown-owned, non-profit company that, like other public services, has been subject to drastic budget cuts under the federal Liberal government's program of fiscal restraint and privatization and that of the Conservative government that preceded it. Over the last 20 years, budget cuts have meant the scrapping of most local and regional TV news coverage, the closing of stations, and fewer drama productions. Since 1990, the publicly owned broadcaster has seen its budget cut from more than C\$1.3 billion to around C\$919 million in constant dollars.

The last significant injection of new government money to the CBC was five years ago. Since then, the Liberals have provided the CBC with yearly additional allocations that do no more than offset the impact of inflation on the broadcaster's budget.

Heritage Minister Liza Frulla and the Liberal government have maintained a public posture of neutrality since CBC management took the offensive and locked out its workers. But the cuts in the government's funding for the CBC and the uncertainty of future funding are undoubtedly the key financial pressure that has led the CBC to press for the gutting of the Guild's job security provisions.

Moreover, the CBC's actions mimic those of its political masters in the Liberal government. The Martin government is currently developing a plan to radically restructure government operations through contracting out and private-public partnerships.

On Thursday, CBC and CMG negotiators returned to the bargaining table. At the conclusion of the day, both sides said enough progress had been made to warrant continuation of the talks.



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