

# Canada's Conservative government to adopt law illegalizing airline workers' strike

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15 June 2011

Only hours after 3,800 Air Canada customer service agents and call centre workers walked off the job to oppose their employer's demands for sweeping contract concessions, Canada's Conservative government served notice that it will introduce legislation as early as this Thursday to illegalize and criminalize their job action.

Speaking in the House of Commons Tuesday afternoon, Labour Minister Lisa Raitt said the government would soon be giving parliament the requisite 48-hour notice of its intention to table legislation ordering the Air Canada workers back to work.

Claiming that the job action at Air Canada could imperil Canada's "fragile" economy, Raitt said, "Canadians gave us a strong mandate ... to complete our economic recovery—so that's why we will put on notice tonight legislation to ensure continuing air service for passengers."

Raitt's claim of a "strong mandate," i.e., massive popular support, is meant to intimidate working people. In fact, the Conservatives received the support of less than 1 in 4 Canadians in last month's federal election.

But their prompt action against the Air Canada strikers underscores that they will use their new parliamentary majority to dramatically intensify the big business assault on the working class. Already in last week's federal budget, the Conservatives reaffirmed their intention to cut per capita federal discretionary spending by well over 10 percent by fiscal year 2014-15. And federal government-owned Canada Post has imposed a partial lockout on 48,000 letter carriers, postal station clerks, mail-sorters, and mail-truck drivers in a bid to slash the wages and benefits of new hires, gut short-term disability benefits, and impose a job-cutting and dangerous new work regime on letter

carriers.

Canada's largest air carrier, Air Canada is seeking to impose massive contract concessions on its 3,800 customer service agents and call-center workers, whose collective bargaining agent is Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) Local 2002, as well as on its mechanics, baggage handlers, flight attendants, and pilots, who are represented by other unions.

These concessions would be in addition to the numerous givebacks that the unions have made to the privately owned, for-profit airline over the past decade.

In the case of the customer service agents and call-center workers, Air Canada is demanding that all active workers, enrolled in the company's current defined pension benefit plan, receive pension benefits 35-40 percent less than previous retirees. Future hires would, meanwhile, be forced into a defined pension contribution scheme, which effectively eliminates any future pension liability for the company and makes workers' retirement earnings wholly dependent on the gyrations of the stock market. Air Canada is also demanding that the age and years-of-service at which workers can retire without penalty be raised by five years.

Air Canada's bosses receive multi-million dollar salaries and lucrative pensions, yet Air Canada's Chief Operating Officer Duncan Dee told CBC Radio yesterday that the company must gut its workers' pension benefits so as to remain "competitive", i.e., a source of large profits for shareholders. Said Dee, "Private sector companies in this country are shifting to defined contribution plans generally ... The only way we can ensure the long-term viability of Air Canada ... [is by] making changes to keep up with the times."

Air Canada is also insisting that the unions agree that employees of a new no-frills charter air carrier it is in

the process of spinning off be paid lower wages and benefits than the airline's other workers.

According to the CAW, its members at Air Canada have suffered a 10 percent cut in their real wages over the past decade, yet the airline has curtly dismissed workers' call for a substantial wage increase.

Last weekend, Air Canada spent tens of thousands of dollars to purchase full-page advertisements in the country's major daily papers to provocatively proclaim that it has "contingency" plans to maintain full operations during a strike. Yesterday these plans were put into operation, with Air Canada deploying its managers and hundreds of scabs—at least some of them reportedly supplied by Garda World Security (a multinational firm active in Iraq)—to do the strikers' jobs.

Yesterday morning some Air Canada pilots and flight attendants refused to cross picket lines established by the striking customer service agents at Montreal's Trudeau Airport. But ultimately they did cross, after Air Canada managers appeared to escort them into work.

Although all Air Canada workers are facing similar concession demands, none of the unions that ostensibly represent them have urged that the striking service agents' and call center workers' picket lines be respected, let alone undertaken to organize a joint anti-concessions strike.

This manifest refusal to adhere to the most elementary principles of worker solidarity only underscores that the unions are opposed to any serious struggle against Air Canada. This is because they recognize such a struggle would mean an all-out confrontation with the Harper government and Canada's ruling elite as a whole and because no less than the airline's bosses they accept that workers' livelihoods must be subordinated to corporate profits and shareholder-value.

The CAW has responded to the Conservative government's blatant attack on the customer service agents and call center workers by signaling that it is eager to cut a deal with the company at the expense of Air Canada workers.

CAW President Ken Lewenza made the obvious point that the haste with which the government has moved to legalize the Air Canada workers' job action indicates that the owners of Canada's largest air carrier

and the government are working in concert to impose concessions. "The speed at which this legislation has been tabled," said Lewenza, "points to a very real collusion by the Conservative federal government and Air Canada, to strip workers of their rights."

But instead of pointing to this collusion to make the case for immediate industrial action by all Air Canada workers and for the mobilization of the entire working class against the Harper government, Lewenza announced that the CAW is determined to strike a deal with Air Canada in the next 48 hours—that is under conditions where the employer has the government's threat of a back-to-work law to further browbeat and intimidate the workers. "Lewenza," reported a CAW statement posted Tuesday evening, "said that he believes it is possible to reach an agreement with Air Canada in the next 48 hours before the legislation is introduced."

The union is thus itself assuming responsibility for suppressing the Air Canada workers' struggle. While publicly deploring the collusion between the company and the government, it will invoke the threat of a strike-breaking law to argue that it has no choice but to abandon the workers' just demands.

If Air Canada workers are not to suffer yet another bitter reversal, they must seize the leadership of their struggle from the CAW. Through the development of rank-and-file committees, organized outside and in opposition to the union apparatus, they must make their strike the spearhead of a working-class political and industrial offensive against all job and wage cuts and in defence of worker rights and public services.



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