

Canada Post imposes partial lockout on 48,000 workers

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The federal government-owned Canada Post Corporation is imposing a partial lockout of 48,000 letter carriers, mail sorters, postal station clerks, and mail truck drivers—the latest in a series of provocations aimed at imposing sweeping contract concessions.

Beginning today, all temporary and casual employees are on indefinite layoff and, according to management, will remain so until the dispute has been settled. Letter carriers are being forced onto a three-day workweek, delivering mail only on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Other postal workers, including mail sorters, will see their hours reduced in like fashion.

Canada's largest Crown Corporation, Canada Post is seeking to impose a two-tier wage and benefits structure, in which new hires will receive almost 20 percent lower wages than the current full- and part-time workforce. Canada Post is also intent on gutting workers' sick-benefits program, slashing jobs through speedup, and imposing a hazardous new mail-sorting regime.

Last week, Canada Post responded to the campaign of localized one-day walkouts that the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) has called in an attempt to defuse rank-and-file pressure for a militant anti-concessions struggle by suspending the benefits of its unionized urban employees. This measure included curtailment of medical and drug allowances for disabled workers.

CUPW responded by offering to call off its then eight-day-old rotating walkout campaign, if Canada Post reinstated the suspended benefits. But management refused.

Instead, Canada Post Chief Operating Officer Jacques Côté issued a letter threatening postal workers with a prolonged confrontation. "At this point," declared Côté, "we feel that the company has taken every reasonable step it can to try to reach a responsible settlement, one that would allow Canada Post to pay higher wages while

closing the pension gap and ensuring that we can reinvest in our business. If the union does not change their entrenched position, I am afraid we are in for a long dispute."

The reality is, it is Canada Post—backed by its boss and owner, the Conservative government of Stephen Harper—that is hell-bent on a confrontation and imposing an historic defeat on postal workers. Were Canada Post to prevail, it would set a new regressive benchmark for public and private sector employers alike. Moreover, the government and the ruling class calculate that the going of the postal workers, who in the 1960s and 1970s spearheaded the explosive struggles through which public sector workers won collective bargaining rights, would facilitate not only the imposition of concessions on federal and provincial public sector workers across the country, but just as importantly the dismantling of the public services they provide.

Canada Post's intransigence stands in sharp contrast with the position of the union. CUPW has repeatedly boasted that the rotating walkouts it has organized have had little impact on the public. When the post office nonetheless claimed that mail volumes have fallen off sharply so as to justify imposing its partial lockout, CUPW announced that it would be "calmly sticking to its (ineffectual rotating strike) strategy." While terming the layoffs of its members and the slashing of their work hours a "provocation," CUPW has avoided calling it a partial lockout—a further signal that its concern is suppressing militant job action for fear that it would quickly lead to a headlong confrontation with the rightwing Harper government.

Sunday marked the tenth day of CUPW's rotating walkout campaign. But the union has still failed to call for job action in Toronto, Vancouver, or Ottawa, three of the country's four major mail-sorting hubs.

As for the ostensible organizations of the working class

and the “left”—the Canadian Labour Congress and the trade union-supported New Democratic Party—they have failed to even issue statements supporting the postal workers’ anti-concessions struggle. This silence is a sure sign that they intend to leave the postal workers to fight Canada Post and the government alone and will vehemently oppose any and all efforts to mobilize the working class in their support.

The corporate media, for their part, are mounting a vicious slander campaign against the postal workers. For weeks, the pages of the nation’s press have been plastered with commentary denouncing the “greed” of “lazy” postal workers who enjoy “luxurious” pay, benefits and pensions. For the past three decades, virtually all gains in real income have been monopolized by the wealthiest 10 percent of Canadians, especially the richest 1 percent. Yet the media pillories postal workers, who earn on average less than \$25 per hour and frequently work in factory-type sorting stations, where air quality is poor and working conditions hazardous, as “fat cats.”

An editorial in *MacLean’s* magazine clearly showed how pivotal the ruling elite views the current battle with the postal workers. Entitled “Time to Send a Message to Canada’s Postal Workers,” the *MacLean’s* editorial declared, “Of course the current postal dispute has significance far beyond the future of letter mail or the ambitions of Canada Post and its union. The gap between private and public sector compensation has now reached crisis proportions, and must be addressed for the sake of equity, affordability and coherent labour peace.”

Other commentators in the mainstream press have gone even further. Michael Taube, an *Ottawa Citizen* columnist and former Harper speechwriter, recently declared, “It’s time for the Harper Tories to either privatize Canada Post, or dismantle the entire operation, sell off its assets, and create a competitive atmosphere for private mail service.” The denunciations of postal workers have not been limited to the rightwing commentators. The liberal editorialists of the *Toronto Star* have also called for privatization and deregulation of the postal service.

In resisting Canada Post’s concession demands and opposing the further corporatization and ultimate privatization of the post office, historically one of the first public services, postal workers are fighting on behalf of the entire working class. Indeed, as early as Tuesday they could be joined on the picket lines by Air Canada ticket agents and call center workers who are also facing sweeping concessions demands, including the gutting of pension benefits.

But if the postal workers’ struggle is not to be strangled by the unions and the NDP, workers must adopt a radically different strategy aimed at making their struggle the spearhead of an industrial and political offensive of the entire working class in defence of wages, worker rights and public service and against the Harper Conservative government.

The CUPW, as attested by its bankrupt rotating strike strategy, has no intention of mounting a serious challenge to Canada Post and the Harper government. Everyone knows that the Conservatives stand behind Canada Post and, if necessary, will use an emergency strikebreaking law to criminalize postal workers’ anti-concessions struggle. But rather than warning workers of the need to prepare for such an eventuality and calling on them to begin mobilizing support throughout the working class for a working-class political offensive against the government, the CUPW is studiously silent. This is a standard tactic employed by the union bureaucracy to short-circuit workers’ opposition to concessions and cutbacks. When the government predictably resorts to an antistrike law, the union declares nothing can be done in the face of the might of the state and orders workers to end their job action.

An appeal from postal workers for a working-class counteroffensive against big business’ drive to make working people pay for the capitalist crisis would evoke a mass response. To mount such a struggle, rank-and-file postal workers must wrest the political and organizational leadership of their struggle from the union officialdom and transform it from a trade union collective bargaining dispute into a political and industrial mobilization of the working class. Towards this end, rank-and-file postal workers should establish committees of action independent of, and in opposition to the CUPW, CLC and NDP.



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