

Canadian unions move to suppress strikes and impose concessions

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Bowing before the Conservative government, the trade unions and trade union-supported New Democratic Party (NDP) have moved to shut down two national anti-concession strikes involving more than 50,000 workers.

The employer-provoked conflicts at Air Canada, the country's largest air carrier, and federal government-owned Canada Post are viewed by Canadian big business as pivotal to advancing their drive to gut workers' living standards and dismantle public services.

Already, the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) union has corralled 3,800 Air Canada customer service agents and call-center workers back to work after agreeing to cuts in pensions and a two-tier benefit structure.

Meanwhile, the Canadian Union of Postal Workers has left no doubt that it will soon terminate all job action by the 48,000 urban letter carriers, mail sorters, mail truck drivers, and postal clerks and accept unprecedented contract concessions.

Only the manner of the CUPW's capitulation is still to be determined. Either it will order the postal workers to meekly submit to a Conservative back-to-work law and allow a government-appointed arbitrator impose concessions or—as the CAW has just done—it will use parliament's impending adoption of strike-breaking legislation as the pretext for imposing a sell-out contract.

Postal workers can and must resist this betrayal. But to do so they must relaunch their anti-concessions struggle on a radically different basis—beginning with the recognition that they face a political struggle.

While the Conservative government of Stephen Harper has only recently intervened directly against the Air Canada and Canada Post workers, it has long been conspiring with their managements in their concession demands.

In 2009, the Conservative government “rescued” Air Canada in a restructuring in which the unions made major contract concessions. At the time, the government insisted that the company had to move rapidly to reduce its pension shortfall. This government demand has led directly to the airline's current drive to slash workers' pensions.

With the Canada Post, the federal government is the boss and owner. The Conservatives, following on from their Liberal predecessors, have imposed on Canada Post a corporate model aimed at completing its transformation from a public service into a profit-making enterprise and privatization target.

If the Harper government has intervened so aggressively to criminalize workers' resistance to concessions, it is because it anticipates mounting popular opposition. Just six weeks after securing a parliamentary majority, it wants to send a clear message—it will use the repressive power of the state to impose big business's agenda.

CAW betrayal

Within the space of 24 hours this past Tuesday and Wednesday, the Harper government initiated the parliamentary process to adopt laws criminalizing all job action by the Air Canada and postal workers and empowering government-appointed arbitrators to dictate their terms of employment.

The government moved to rob the Air Canada workers of their basic rights the very day they walked out, claiming their strike jeopardized the economic recovery. The CAW, the country's largest industrial union, responded to the government's obligatory 48-hour notification of the introduction of legislation illegalizing the Air Canada strike by declaring its determination to reach a “negotiated” settlement with the airline.

Yesterday it accepted a concessions-laden contract, which will undoubtedly prove even worse when the full details become public. Air Canada workers were themselves accorded no chance to see the terms of the four-year agreement, let alone vote on it, before being forced to report for work.

The union, which earlier conceded that its members' real wages have fallen by 10 percent over the past decade, is trumpeting as a victory the agreement's granting of annual wage increases of 2 percent, about equal to the inflation rate, for the first three years, with a 3 percent increase in the final year.

On pensions, the key issue in dispute, the CAW had made sweeping concessions—concessions it nonetheless has tried to pass off as “slight.” It has agreed that starting in 2013 pension benefits for new retirees will be cut, and new hires will not be part of the current defined-pension benefit scheme. An arbitrator will determine how new hires' pensions are to be structured and funded.

Last but not least, the CAW agreement sets a regressive benchmark for the more than 20,000 other Air Canada

workers—mechanics, baggage handlers, flight attendants, and pilots—now facing similar concession demands.

Not surprisingly, the government has praised the CAW agreement. Indeed, Minister of Labour Lisa Raitt rightly observed that it followed the formula she had proposed when announcing the government's intention to adopt a back-to-work law unless the union and Air Canada reached a settlement in the next 48 hours.

"If Air Canada management and the union," said Raitt last Tuesday, "are at such a point where they know that they have a big ticket item on the table that they're having a struggle to deal with in a short period of time—and presumably it's the pension issue—they can voluntarily send this to an arbitrator of their own choice."

Betrayal of postal workers planned

The Canadian Union of Postal Workers is now following exactly the same course. It is pleading to Canada Post to somewhat lessen its concession demands and accept the union as a true partner. Toward that end, top union officials met with Canada Post President Deepak Chopra on Thursday.

But the CUPW leadership also knows that rank-and-file postal workers are outraged by the company's provocative actions and concession demands, which include a two-tier wage and benefit system, a regressive new short-term disability plan, and a job-cutting and hazardous new mail sorting regimen.

Ultimately, the CUPW officialdom may conclude that it can best serve its interests by not taking direct responsibility for imposing Canada Post's demands.

The one thing that the CUPW does exclude is mounting a struggle against the government. Already CUPW President Denis Lemelin is issuing press releases that are nothing less than a requiem for the postal workers' job action and anti-concessions struggle. These releases urge workers to be "proud" of their strike and claim that CUPW will continue to wage the good fight even if a settlement cannot be reached with Canada Post.

From the beginning, CUPW has been determined to avert a confrontation with the Harper government. That was their justification for employing an ineffectual strategy of localized 24-hour rotating walkouts.

Predictably, this refusal to mobilize postal workers' industrial might only encouraged Canada Post and the Harper government. Now that this inevitable confrontation is at hand, CUPW is preparing its surrender.

As for the Canadian Labour Congress and the NDP, they issued not even pro forma statements in support of the postal workers' struggle until the Conservatives moved to criminalize it. Yet they concede that they expected the Harper government to take such action. In other words, the CLC and NDP leaders kept postal workers in the dark as to the character of the struggle they would face, thereby ensuring they would be ill prepared and politically disarmed.

Now the CLC and NDP are working with the CUPW to mount

various protests rallies and demonstrations. The ostensible purpose of these actions is to protest the government's attack on workers' rights. Their true aim is to defuse the anger among postal workers so they can be corralled back to work and the union's domination maintained.

In 1978, when CUPW did defy a back-to-work law, the CLC and NDP refused to organize action in postal workers' support, even when Liberal Prime Minister Trudeau threatened them with mass firings, had the CUPW president arrested, and ordered the RCMP to raid union offices across the country. The country's principal labor federation and the social democrats worked with the government to isolate and break the strike, for they feared it could precipitate a general strike and undermine Canadian capitalism.

In the intervening three decades, the unions and NDP have lurched massively to the right and integrated themselves ever more with big business. While the unions serve as secondary enforcers for management, imposing concessions and suppressing strikes, the NDP has helped dismantle the social welfare programs it once held up as proof capitalism could be reformed.

In opposing the joint efforts of the CAW, CUPW, CLC and NDP to terminate the Air Canada and postal workers' struggles, workers must recognize these organizations cannot be pressured to the left or reformed. Only through the development of rank-and-file committees, organized outside and in opposition to the union apparatus and social-democratic politicians, will it be possible to organize defiance of the Harper government's strikebreaking legislation and make the postal workers' struggle the spearhead of a working class political and industrial offensive against all job and wage cuts and in defense of worker rights and public services.

The corporate media's vilification of postal workers as "overpaid" corresponds to the desire of big business to make an example of a group of public sector workers. Big business wants public sector workers' compensation slashed so as to lower wages and benefits across the board. But a no less important calculation is that the intimidation of public sector workers will greatly facilitate the dismantling of the vital services that they administer.

The wide-ranging reactionary motivations for the Harper government's attack on the postal workers underscore the huge stake that the entire working class has in their struggle and point to the strategy they need to adopt.

Postal and auto workers must make their struggle the spearhead of an industrial and political mobilization of the entire working class against the Conservative government and in defense of jobs, pensions, worker rights and public services. Such a mobilization would create the basis for the emergence of an independent political movement of the working class aimed at bringing to power a workers' government committed to organizing economic life to meet social needs, not enrich a handful of bankers and corporate bosses.



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