

Canada Post strike:

Trade union-based NDP facilitates passage of striking-breaking law

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The trade union-based New Democratic Party (NDP) has facilitated passage of a savage strikebreaking law that criminalizes all job action by the country's 48,000 urban postal workers and ensures sweeping contract concessions will be imposed upon them.

On Saturday, after just 58 hours of parliamentary debate and maneuvering, the NDP bowed to pressure from the majority Conservative government and the corporate media and abandoned its half-hearted campaign to delay passage of Bill C-6. Soon after, the Conservative-dominated House of Commons adopted the bill, while the three other opposition parties joined the NDP in making a token display of dissent by voting against it. The anti-worker legislation is now being rushed through the Senate and will receive royal assent, thereby becoming law, no later than this morning.

Even as the NDP gave up its efforts to block passage of Bill C-6, party spokesmen conceded that the Conservative legislation is an unprecedented attack on the rights of all workers and has been crafted with the express purpose of bolstering big business' drive for contract concessions and speed-up.

Deputy NDP leader Thomas Mulcair said the strikebreaking legislation is "an indication of what's to come for other public service workers who are unionized. ... It's also a signal from the Conservatives to all employers—in a union setting or otherwise—that it's an open bar. They can start going after the acquired rights of their workers."

The legislation illegalizes any and all job action by the 48,000 letter carriers, mail-sorters, mail-truck drivers, and postal station clerks until the expiry of a four-year contract to be imposed by a Conservative government-appointed arbitrator. Workers who defy its provisions face fines of up to \$1,000 per day, while union officials could

be hit with \$50,000 per day fines.

The legislation imposes a Conservative-authored wage settlement that is significantly lower than the last wage-offer made by the federal government-owned Canada Post and which, because of inflation, will translate into a cut in real wages for current Canada Post employees.

Arguably most significant of all, the legislation provides for a "final offer," "winner take-all" arbitration system designed to ensure that Canada Post will be able to impose its sweeping concession demands. These demands include the establishment of a two-tier wage and benefit structure, the gutting of postal workers' short-term disability program, and the implementation of a new hazardous and job-cutting work-regimen for letter carriers.

In an interview Sunday, Labour Minister Lisa Raitt herself pointed to the importance the government attaches to "final offer selection" as a means of short-circuiting any compromise over Canada Post's concession drive. Raitt claimed the dispute with the NDP over the back-to-work legislation "came down to one thing—we felt we needed final offer selection ... and the NDP would not agree to that kind of arbitration."

Emboldened by the government's intervention, Canada Post adamantly persisted with all its concession demands during a series of on-again, off-again negotiations held between Thursday and Saturday, even as the union, by its own admission, "modified" its stance. Speaking Sunday, a Canada Post spokeswoman claimed the two sides "couldn't have been further apart on several issues."

Mulcair claimed the NDP's short-lived filibuster had constituted "a shot across the bow to the Conservatives." But it was the social democrats who backed down, abruptly ending their delaying tactics although they were under no legal or parliamentary-procedural compulsion to

do so.

Conservative Prime Minister Harper, for his part, gloated over the NDP's surrender. "We know," said Harper, "what side the public was on and I think today members of Parliament on the other side finally started to get that message." Earlier the prime minister had spoken in the debate over Bill C-6. He vigorously defended the government's decision to resort to back-to-work legislation just as soon as government-owned Canada Post had decreed a nationwide lockout and the imposition of a wage settlement inferior to even that proposed by Canada Post. Harper termed the wage increases being imposed on postal workers by government fiat as "fair": "They reflect what we have negotiated with federal public servants."

The NDP's response to Bill C-6 was closely coordinated with the leadership of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) and the Canadian Labour Congress.

Its first objective was to provide the union with a political cover for its decision to abandon postal workers' anti-concession struggle and bow before the government assault.

In a statement Sunday announcing the CUPW National Executive Board's unanimous decision to submit to the Conservatives' strikebreaking legislation, the union leadership pointed to the savage penalties outlined in the legislation adding that "this government would use any excuse to destroy the union should we defy the legislation."

But CUPW's capitulation was not dictated by the punitive penalties threatened in Bill C-6. It was the outcome of the union's strategy throughout the negotiations—a strategy which was focused not on defending postal workers, but at averting a confrontation with the rightwing Conservative government. Toward this end, CUPW limited postal workers to an ineffectual campaign of localized rotating strikes and boasted about the campaign's lack of impact on Canada Post's operations. Throughout the months of stalled negotiations and indeed up until the passage of Bill C-6, the union studiously avoided any discussion of what postal workers should do when the government intervened directly in support of the concession demands of a company of which they are the boss and sole shareholder. Most importantly, the union leadership, and its allies in the NDP and CLC, deliberately isolated the postal workers struggle. Nothing was done to make their struggle part of a broader industrial and political offensive of the working class against concessions and the dismantling of public

services. In fact, the CLC and NDP didn't even issue press releases expressing support for the postal workers until the government announced it was legislating an end to their 12-day campaign of rotating strikes.

The eleventh hour parliamentary maneuvers of the NDP were meant to convince workers that the union and its allies had done all they could—that further resistance was futile.

The second objective of the NDP's filibuster of Bill C-6 was to see if the government and Canada Post could be prodded into slightly moderating their attack. The NDP had hailed the concessions-laden contract that the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) had reached with Air Canada only the week before under the threat of imminent passage of another Conservative strikebreaking law. And the NDP held up the resumption of talks between Canada Post and the union on Friday as proof of the utility of its attempt to delay the passage of Bill C-6.

Soon however, the NDP, with CUPW's blessing, moved from opposing the legislation outright to proposing amendments to it. These included allowing the government-appointed arbitrator to engage in mediation and imposing on postal workers Canada Post's previous wage offer rather than the even worse one designed by the government.

Predictably, the Conservatives tartly rejected all the NDP amendments and not long after the social democrats responded by abandoning their efforts to impede passage of Bill C-6.

By isolating the postal workers' struggle and capitulating before the Conservatives' authoritarian Bill C-6, the unions and NDP have given the Conservative government an important victory that it will now seek to exploit in intensifying the assault on the working class.



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