

Canadian postal workers approach strike deadline

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After seven months of fruitless bargaining, 48,000 members of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) will be in a legal position to go on strike Thursday night unless negotiators for Canada Post—a crown corporation—reach a last-minute deal with the union. Late Wednesday, Canada Post president and CEO Deepak Chopra and union head Denis Lemelin scheduled a face-to-face meeting in a bid to finalize a contract loaded with sweeping concessionary demands from the corporation.

An all-out strike would bring letter and parcel sorting and mail delivery to a standstill across the country. But despite receiving a 95 percent strike mandate from the membership, the CUPW leadership has to date refused to prepare its membership for any such eventuality. It first promoted a possible strategy of partial, rotating strikes, and then delayed any strike call at all for over a week whilst offering up significant last-ditch concessions ultimately rejected by the employer.

The CUPW makes clear that the last thing in the world it wants is a confrontation with the Stephen Harper Conservative government and its austerity program.

“We don’t want a strike, what we want is a negotiated collective agreement”, said union representative Arlyn Doran. “So we’ll employ the type of strategy that we think will best assist us in that regard.”

The union has agreed to organize volunteers to process and deliver pensions and other assistance payments to those recipients who do not have direct deposit arrangements.

In contrast to their leadership’s reluctance to directly confront Canada Post and the government, postal workers over the past year have taken wildcat strike action in Edmonton, Winnipeg and Scarborough

(Ontario) against management’s drive for productivity increases through letter-carrier cutbacks, unsafe speed-ups, and forced overtime. In the run-up to the current dispute, the overwhelming strike mandate that the union received for a new contract involved the highest turnout ever in the history of the union.

Even the wording of CUPW’s Monday announcement giving the required 72 hours notice to Canada Post showed the union’s willingness to hold its members back from the picket lines after the expiration of the deadline: “Today, in an effort to break the impasse at negotiations, CUPW presented a final offer to the Canada Post Corporation negotiating committee. The Union also issued its strike notice to the Employer and the Minister of Labour. **If we have not reached a negotiated collective agreement we will be in a legal position to strike** (bold added) as of 11:59 p.m. EDT on Thursday, June 2nd, 2011”.

In previous disputes, the union has withheld strike authorization after the passing of its deadlines to continue negotiations that resulted in concessionary contracts.

In this current round, Canada Post is insisting on massive concessions in the new contract. They are offering a paltry 1.9 percent wage rise—in effect a wage cut when inflation is factored in—and a two-tier wages and benefits system that would see new workers receive 22 percent less than “grand-fathered” workers. New hires would also have a different pension plan that would require them to bear increased risk from a fluctuating and volatile stock market. They would also receive less paid leave and be forced to work longer hours with less job security.

All postal workers—whether newly hired or not—would be forced into a new short-term disability sick leave plan that would pay 30 percent less than

current arrangements, require employees to use personal days to bridge onto short-term disability all the while having their claims made subject to approval by an outside insurance company. Postal workers already suffer higher than normal work-related injuries and afflictions due to the nature of their work.

Related to the sick leave issue, and just as contentious, are demands by the corporation to change work rules for postal delivery that would force letter carriers to go about their rounds in a highly dangerous way. As one blogger has described it, Canada Post “is also trying to implement working conditions that defy any standard of health and safety. They want letter carriers to carry double bundles in one arm...this means two huge satchels on your side, a scanner gun, a heavy bundle of mail in your hand, and a heavy bundle of mail on that same forearm. This is just plain dangerous, especially with longer routes and inclement weather. In places where they have tried to implement this change, letter carriers simply refused to work under such conditions and went out on a wildcat strike”.

Canada Post has been profitable for 16 consecutive years, including registering a \$281 million profit in 2009—a year in which mail volumes plummeted due to the global financial crisis. It has used some of those profits to finance a \$2 billion investment in new technology that has already resulted in the sacking of over one 1,000 full-time postal workers and hundreds more temporary employees as well as the dilution of urban services and the closure of rural post offices.

However, just as the corporation demands extreme sacrifice from its workforce, its chief executive, Moya Green (who left the position in February), was the highest paid public servant in the country raking in \$641,000 in compensation for her final year. Chopra, her recent replacement, stands to make even more.

The assault on postal workers is not simply aimed at gutting their contractual protections but, more broadly, at opening the door to the dismantling of the public services that they provide. If the upcoming struggle by CUPW members is not to be isolated and lost, workers must repudiate the orientation of their union leadership. They must strive to make their struggle the spearhead of an industrial and political counter-offensive of the entire working class against the drive of big business across Canada to make working people pay for the world capitalist crisis.



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