

Striking Canadian postal worker:

“We are fighting for everyone to be equal”

A WSWWS reporting team
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The Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) is persisting with its strategy of rolling localized one-day walkouts, even though government-owned Canada Post is aggressively attacking the 45,000 mail-sorters, letter carriers and truck drivers.

Not only is Canada Post continuing to demand massive contract concessions, including a \$7 an hour wage cut for new hires and the gutting of postal workers' short-term disability plan. It has responded to CUPW's campaign of limited job action by dramatically slashing work hours and hence the pay of postal workers across the country.

Canada Post announced yesterday that beginning next week the work-week for letter carriers will be reduced to just three days. Workers at Canada Post mail-sorting plants will also face dramatic cuts in their hours of work.

The company has justified this partial lock-out by claiming that mail volumes have fallen by 50 percent since CUPW launched its rotating-strike campaign last Friday. Announcing the impending cut in hours, Canada Post spokesman John Hamilton told reporters, “We can't keep our costs the same while we've seen our business drop by half. We need to take action now to avoid significant losses that would harm our financial self-sustainability.”

CUPW has disputed the employer's claims of a massive drop in mail volume, although it does note that Canada Post has shifted part of its business to Purolator, a once privately-owned parcel-delivery service that is now a Canada Post subsidiary.

Traditionally unions have pointed to the effectiveness of workers' job actions in crippling an employer's operations. But CUPW, as part of its bankrupt strategy of seeking to avoid a showdown with Canada Post and Canada's rightwing Conservative government, has repeatedly boasted that its job action is having little impact on postal services.

Hamilton claimed that the CUPW job action is unnecessary because Canada Post stands ready to

negotiate, but quickly made clear that the only type of “negotiations” Canada's largest Crown-owned corporation is interested in involve the surrender of postal workers' hard-won rights and benefits.

“We're not at the table,” said Canada Post's spokesman “to discuss adding a billion dollars of labour costs over the next four years. We're not at the table to discuss stopping any efforts under way to modernize this company and secure our future. That's not what we're there to talk about.”

Hamilton's reference to modernization concerns Canada Post's insistence that it have a complete free hand in implementing a new mail-sorting process that allows the employer to dramatically increase letter carriers' workload and slash jobs. Wherever the new process has been introduced, accidents and injuries have increased exponentially.

Publicly the Harper government has said little about the conflict at Canada Post, except to call on both sides to quickly come to a settlement. But there is no question that the Conservative government stands fully behind Canada Post and views a going of postal workers, who in the 1960s and 1970s spearheaded the explosive growth of public sector unionism, as an important step in implementing its plans to slash social spending and public services.

Canada's media, meanwhile, has been full of shrill condemnations of the postal workers for daring to challenge the ruling class' drive to make working people pay for the capitalist crisis.

The ruling elite's unanimous opposition to the postal workers' anti-concessions struggle stands in sharp contrast with the response of the ostensible organizations of the left and the working class. Neither the Canadian Labour Congress nor the trade union-supported New Democratic Party has even issued a statement of support for the postal workers--a sure sign that they intend to leave postal workers to fight the government and big

business on their own and will oppose any and all efforts to make the postal workers' struggle the spearhead of a working-class counter-offensive.

On Monday, *World Socialist Web Site* reporters spoke with striking postal workers who were picketing the principal mail-sorting plant in Montreal.

The workers were unanimous in rejecting Canada Post's concession demands and in their opposition to the Harper government. While some indicated support for an all-out strike, others supported the union's rotating strike strategy, because they feared that the government would pass an emergency law to make a national strike illegal.

Yannick Scott, CUPW's Education and Organization Officer for the Metro-Montreal region, told the *WSWS*, the union leadership has excluded nothing, even organizing defiance of a strike-breaking law.

This bluster is meant to confuse and constrain the rank-and-file. The CUPW has done absolutely nothing to prepare its members, let alone the working class for an all-out struggle with Canada Post's boss, the Harper government. On the contrary, while it occasionally employs radical rhetoric, CUPW's entire conduct of the current struggle underscores that it far prefers to surrender before Canada Post's concession demands than mount the industrial and political offensive that is required to successfully oppose the cross-Canada assault on postal workers and the working class as a whole.

The rank-and-file CUPW members interviewed by the *WSWS* explained that while Canada Post is now trying to impose inferior wages and benefits on new hires, it has long maintained a large group of so-called "temporary workers" who are paid a dollar an hour less than regular postal workers, have no benefits, and are permanently on-call.

Francois (who has been employed as a temporary mail truck driver for the past 3 years) told the *WSWS*: "I work here (at the Montreal mail-sorting plant), I work at Saint-Leonard, I work a little bit everywhere. Because we are AO's (Aides occasionnels - temporary workers), we never work the same job, unlike the part-timers or the full-timers.

"There are many differences between our wages and conditions and those of the permanent workers - full or part time. First, we don't have any insurance, no pensions, no benefits, nothing. The only thing we have is our wage. We have no guarantee of hours. There are weeks that I don't work at all. Some weeks I work a little, other weeks a lot. We never know. So for one's expenses, it's very difficult to plan, because we don't know, ever how much

we'll be paid.

"As a result, many of us have two jobs, sometimes even three. People say, 'At the post office you are doing well. It's great to work there.' But it has changed a lot over the past 50 years. It is not at all like what it once was. We have to fight today to have a good wage, proper insurance and pensions. Look at me, its three years I've been working here and I have nothing."

Jonathan Lapointe explained that AO's are under constant pressure from management. "A temporary worker doesn't have job security, so he needs to be reasonably alert. If the boss tells a temporary worker to do something, most won't take the chance of saying 'No.' They'll do what's been asked of them. So yes, it can be a form of intimidation. 'Do this, otherwise something will happen.'"

Asked what he considers to be the key issue at stake in the current conflict with Canada Post, Jonathan replied, "The solidarity between the members. ... For us, it is completely unacceptable that a new worker doesn't have the same working conditions as the rest of us who are doing the same job. We want everyone to be equal. ... It is a form of social solidarity that should be maintained and that should be everywhere, not just at Canada Post, but everywhere, no matter the province or the country.

"Our goal is to be really unified, to maintain solidarity, and to go all the way so that we are all equal. That's really the goal, to have good working conditions, to be well at work."

A third temporary worker, Jeremy Leclair, told the *WSWS*, "We are not asking for much, just to keep what we already have. If I'm not mistaken, the only additional thing we are asking for is a wage increase that doesn't even keep up with the inflation rate."



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