Canadian postal union limits worker resistance to isolated walkouts

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Localized, rotating strikes by postal sorters and letter carriers organized by the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) have now extended into a sixth day. To date, postal workers have been called out for 24 hour strikes in Winnipeg, Hamilton, Montreal, and yesterday in Victoria, British Columbia and Moncton, New Brunswick.

The CUPW has justified the limited job action by claiming that it wants to avoid an all-out confrontation. But negotiations between the Crown, i.e. government-owned, corporation and the union were discontinued in Ottawa late Tuesday.

The walkouts have had only a minimal effect on the distribution of mail across the country. Canada Post reported that on average 40 million pieces of mail have been delivered daily since the rotating strikes began last Friday—which largely matches volumes before the onset of the dispute. Corporate management nonetheless took advantage of the contractual impasse to further bolster their bottom lines by pulling temporary letter carriers from their routes Monday and cutting the hours of part-time workers.

With negotiations reaching another impasse, the CUPW officialdom is scheduled to review current strategy. “Our plans are to continue the rotating strikes,” said Jeff Callaghan, national director of the union’s Atlantic Region. “Our board is meeting later on, so we’ll make that determination if there’s an escalation or if we keep going with the rotating strikes. For the most part we’re trying to lessen the impact on the communities that we serve, so we’ll make that determination once we meet.”

The union leadership is pursuing a strategy that seeks to avoid a confrontation with the Conservative government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper, even as the Conservatives prepare a frontal assault on the jobs, wages and benefits of government workers and the public services that they provide. Not only has the union declined to call a national strike to defend its members against the concession demands of Canada Post, it has so far even avoided the targeting of major mail sorting hubs in Toronto, Vancouver and Calgary. Said Alain Duguay, president of the Montreal local of CUPW, repeating the mantra of other union officials, “Our objective (in the strike) is that the public suffers from it as little as possible.”

In this, the union has so far succeeded. With virtually no disruption to its operations, Canada Post has seen no reason to significantly alter its pre-strike final offer. The CUPW leadership admitted as much in a statement Monday. “Today, after reviewing our June 3rd proposals for three days, (Canada Post) totally rejected our offer. They made virtually no effort to bring the parties closer together, and in fact, reneged on several of their previous proposals with respect to staffing.”

The mainstream press has been full of triumphalist commentary that the once “mighty” postal workers union—with a membership that carried out militant, national strikes for improved wages, pensions and benefits in the 1960s and 1970s—has been brought to heel by the realities of 21st century electronic communications technologies. The public, they boast, has so far greeted the strike with little more than a yawn.

The editorialists of the *Toronto Star* recently weighed in on the matter. Calling for privatization and de-regulation of the postal service, they opined, “Canada Post and its union are locked in a death embrace. The rotating strikes that started on Friday will only make it worse as most Canadians realize how little they rely on the post office, and quickly figure out ways to use it even less than they do now.” Favorably citing the schemes under which postal services in Holland, Austria and Germany have been partially or wholly privatized, the *Star* editorialists fail to mention that postal rates are higher in those jurisdictions even under conditions where those countries have much more compressed and urbanized populations.

The remarks of right-wing Sun Media writer Ezra Levant further develop the argument. “Bring it on, and make it long,” says Levant. “A strike will spur customers of snail mail to finally make the leap into a new technology—a leap they might not have made on their own without the inconvenience of a strike. ... Millions of Canadians already pay their bills online—this will hasten that trend. Already, mail-order catalogues have given way to online shopping. So a strike would be a momentary nuisance—until people realized they really didn’t need the post office anyway. Don’t worry about old age security cheques or pensions or things like that. The union and Canada Post have a special agreement to continue delivering those to the truly needy. So a strike will hurt the general public less than at any time in the past.”

Of course, Levant obscures some basic facts. Online shopping still requires the actual delivery of parcels. Indeed, parcel

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distribution revenues have greatly increased as a result of e-technologies. Furthermore, entire swathes of the vast country do not have Internet service and are entirely reliant on mail delivery. And if basic letter delivery volumes have decreased by 17 percent since 2008, much of this has been a result of the economic downturn. The actual number of addresses serviced by letter carriers continues to steadily increase. Canada Post has, moreover, operated with a profit for 16 consecutive years including registering a $281 million surplus in 2009, the last year for which full records have been made available.

One does not have to scratch too deeply below the surface of the mainstream press' pontifications, however, to get to the main point of the editorialists. Wages, pensions and benefits are far too high for Canadian workers. Even as salaries for Canadian CEOs continue to skyrocket—indeed, the Canada Post president is the highest paid civil servant in the country—workers must come to the realization that times have changed. As Levant so arrogantly puts it, "there's a growing national consensus against what Toronto's mayor, Rob Ford, called 'the gravy train.' That's shorthand for the kind of folks who get a sweet gig at public expense, living in a wealthy fantasyland made possible by increasingly impatient taxpayers."

Postal workers have one of the highest rates of injury and physical affliction in the entire Canadian labour force. The pace of work in the sorting stations is intense, the air quality continuously dubious. Letter carrier routes and loads continue to increase. For this, workers earn a modest wage averaging about $25 per hour. Thousands of employees have worked for years under part-time or temporary arrangements. But for Canada's elite and their paid hacks like Levant, this constitutes a "wealthy fantasyland".

These calls for massive attacks on the living standards of working people have only grown more shrill in the wake of last month's election of a majority Conservative government. Speaking to the Ontario Business Network last month, Catherine Swift, president of the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, revealed what was on the minds of Canada's political and economic establishment. Public sector unions, she said, "were getting a free ride". Pensions were far too generous. Workers were, unfortunately living too long! Pension plans were devised when workers had a much shorter life-span. Thus, the age for retirement must be increased. Defined benefit plans must be abolished before we "hit the wall like Greece". "What would be ideal", concluded Swift, "is getting rid of public-sector unions entirely".

The concession demands of Canada Post management begin to go down this road. The corporation is 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 18 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 receive less paid leave and be forced to work longer hours with less job security. With 22,000 of the 48,000 strong workforce slated for retirement in the next ten years, the lower tier conditions will quickly become the norm even as Canada Post continues to cut jobs.

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 and require employees to use personal days to bridge onto short-term disability, while having their claims made subject to approval by an outside insurance company.

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 coast-to-coast public services that they provide.

If the upcoming struggle by CUPW members is not to be isolated and lost, workers must repudiate the cowardly orientation of their union leadership.

The CUPW leadership's refusal to call an all-out strike in the face of the employer's massive concession demands is the surest sign that the union is already bowing to the company's demands for a two-tier system. While workers are determined to resist, the union is ready to haggle with the employer over the price of the new, cheap labour.

To oppose such a betrayal, postal workers must seize the leadership of their anti-concessions struggle and make it 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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