

The criminalization of the Canadian postal strike and the role of the unions and NDP

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Canada's Conservative government used its newly acquired parliamentary majority to criminalize the anti-concessions struggle waged by Canada Post's 48,000 urban letter carriers, mail sorters, and postal clerks. But the government had no need to mobilize the courts and police to enforce its savage strikebreaking law. That was done by the trade unions and their political allies in the New Democratic Party (NDP).

Claiming that if postal workers defied the Conservatives' authoritarian legislation the government would have the pretext it wants to destroy the Canadian Union of Postal Workers, the union's National Executive Board voted unanimously last Sunday to order postal workers to end all job action and return to work. Earlier the CUPW leadership had agreed that the social-democratic NDP should abandon efforts to delay passage of the anti-postal worker bill through a parliamentary filibuster.

Never did the CUPW so much as raise the possibility of postal workers defying the Conservatives' draconian law and appealing to the working class for support. On the contrary, the union, the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) and the NDP did everything to isolate the postal workers and convince them all resistance was futile.

By enforcing the back-to-work order, the unions and NDP have handed Stephen Harper's Conservative government a major victory only weeks after it secured a parliamentary majority, even though less than one in every four Canadians voted Conservative. Big business strongly supported the Conservatives' bid for a parliamentary majority, just as they did their December 2008 "constitutional coup," because they want a "strong" government committed to removing all restraints on the accumulation of corporate profits and eliminating the rights and social protections that working people won through decades of struggle.

The CLC and NDP leaders themselves concede that the Conservatives' attack on the postal workers—coming just days after the government bullied Air Canada customer service agents into accepting pension cuts by threatening them with back-to-work legislation—targets all workers, public and private. This only makes their capitulation all the more significant and politically damning: the unions and social democrats prefer to see a major defeat inflicted on the working class than mobilize working people in class struggle against the Conservative government and Canada's capitalist elite.

Speaking just moments after the NDP had agreed to facilitate speedy passage of the strikebreaking bill, the party's deputy leader, Thomas Mulcair, called the legislation "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 Conservative government and the corporate media are gloating over the postal workers' defeat. Labour Minister Lisa Raitt vowed that the government will not hesitate to intervene in like fashion in the event of further worker unrest. "The message from this," said Raitt, "is [unions and employers], do your own deals,' otherwise, 'this is the solution you're going to get'."

The Conservatives' Bill C-6 not only illegalizes postal workers' resistance to concessions, threatening individual workers with fines of up to \$1,000 for each day they fail to carry out their normal work duties. It imposes a wage settlement inferior to that offered by Canada Post management and has a raft of provisions designed to ensure that the employer succeeds in imposing a two-tier pay and benefit structure, gutting postal workers' short-term sick-leave plan, and implementing a new job-cutting and hazardous work regimen.

The Conservative government has arrogated to itself sole authority to select the arbitrator who will write the postal workers' contract, and in a break from precedent, it has limited the arbitrator's role to choosing between imposing the union or employer's "final contract" offer *in toto*. Furthermore, Bill C-6 includes a series of "directives," relating to profitability, "competitiveness," and management "flexibility," that legally compel the arbitrator to impose Canada Post's concession demands.

The Conservative government, with the full backing of Canadian big business, deliberately provoked a showdown with postal workers—a section of the working class long vilified by big business because of the militant struggles it mounted in the 1960s and 1970s.

Like the Liberal governments that preceded it, Stephen Harper's Conservative government has pressed Canada Post, which has made a profit in each of the last 14 years, to "corporatize" its operations. No sooner did Canada Post impose a national lockout, on the palpably false pretext that the union's campaign of localized walkouts was imperiling the federal-owned company's financial future, than the Conservatives announced their intention to legislate postal workers back to work and have a government-appointed arbitrator dictate their wages and working conditions.

Since the 2008 global financial crisis, there has been a growing clamor from Canada's corporate elite for an exemplary goring of a section of public-sector workers. Hence the outcry against Toronto municipal workers when they struck in the summer of 2009 in opposition to the city's demands for concessions and the support voiced for the plan of Toronto's new arch-right-wing mayor to deploy strikebreakers should workers resist the privatization of garbage collection and other services.

The big-business campaign to slash public sector workers' wages,

pensions and other benefits is aimed at lowering the benchmark for the wages and benefits of all working people. But it has a second equally important aim. Breaking the resistance of public-sector workers is viewed by the ruling class as pivotal to moving forward with their plans to dismantle public and social services.

The assault on the postal workers comes just weeks after the Conservative government unveiled a self-avowed “austerity” budget that outlines plans to shrink federal government per capita discretionary spending by more than 10 percent over the next four years, while further lowering corporate taxes. Prime Minister Harper and Finance Minister Jim Flaherty are demanding that the provinces also move quickly to balance their budgets through social spending cuts. In this they are pressing at an open door. Provincial governments of all political stripes, including the NDP governments in Nova Scotia and Manitoba, have declared austerity and fiscal responsibility to be their watchwords. Meanwhile, big business is ever more forthrightly demanding a social policy counterrevolution, claiming that Medicare (universal public health insurance) and other public and social services are “unsustainable.”

In Canada, no less than in Greece, Spain, Britain and the US, big business is determined to extricate itself from the crisis of the profit system by driving the working class back to the type of conditions that existed in the first decades of the last century, when there were almost no regulatory restraints on capital and few, if any, social-welfare programs.

This ruling-class offensive is being bitterly resisted all over the world, but everywhere the working class runs up against the same central problem. The ostensible organizations of the working class and “left” parties all defend the capitalist system and agree that workers’ rights and social position must be sacrificed so as to ensure the competitive position of their respective ruling classes in the world struggle for market share and profits.

In the case of the postal workers’ struggle, CUPW’s guiding principle was not the implacable defence of postal workers’ rights, but avoiding a confrontation with the Harper Conservative government.

Toward that end, it limited postal workers’ job actions to an ineffectual series of localized rotating strikes, then boasted about how little impact the walkouts were having on Canada Post’s operations. Repeated employer provocations were met by union offers to suspend all job action.

Above all, the CUPW leadership isolated the postal workers’ struggle, constraining it within the narrow confines of a collective bargaining dispute—whose rules the government promptly and predictably short-circuited.

The CLC and NDP were, if anything, even more determined to isolate the postal workers. Prior to the government announcing its intention to criminalize the postal workers’ struggle, they breathed not a word about the strike and the impending showdown with the Conservatives.

In response to the Harper government’s announcement that it would resort to strikebreaking legislation, the *World Socialist Web Site* explained, “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 points to the strategy they need to adopt.

“Postal workers must make their struggle the spearhead of an industrial and political mobilization of the entire working class against the Conservative government and in defence of jobs, pensions, worker

rights and public services.”

But for CUPW and the entire “official” movement there could be no more dangerous outcome, since the unions’ legal status and the privileges of the high-paid bureaucrats who staff their apparatuses come from their role in policing the working class.

The campaign the unions and NDP mounted against Bill C-6 was a mock struggle. Consisting of a handful of sparsely attended demonstrations and a short-lived filibuster, it was intended to defuse workers’ anger and bolster CUPW’s authority, so as to ensure the union was able to enforce the strikebreaking legislation when it became law.

The NDP, whose vote, unlike that of Harper and his Conservatives, increased dramatically in the May 2 federal election, has, with the CLC’s fulsome support, responded to its increased influence by lurching even further right. Since becoming the Official Opposition, the NDP has repeatedly proclaimed its willingness to work with the Harper government, supported the extension of Canada’s leading role in the imperialist assault on Libya and facilitated the state assault on the postal workers. The transparent aim of NDP leader Jack Layton and his fellow social democrats is to convince the Canadian elite that they can be trusted to rule on its behalf, supplanting the Liberal Party as the bourgeoisie’s “left” party of government.

Workers must draw the lessons of the unions’ and NDP’s role in aiding and abetting the Harper government in inflicting a major defeat on the postal workers and accelerating, thereby, big business’ drive to make working people pay for the global capitalist crisis.

To defend its social position and fundamental rights, the working class must advance its own program to resolve the economic crisis at the expense of big business, through the bringing to power of a workers’ government committed to placing the banks and basic industry under public ownership and the democratic control of the working class.

All of the struggles of working people against plant closures, public service cuts, concessions and anti-worker laws must be united into an independent working class political movement against the Harper government and the entire capitalist order.

Such a struggle requires a political and organizational break with the unions and the NDP, which exist to suppress and smother the working class. In opposition to the labor bureaucrats, workers must build new independent organizations of struggle, workplace and neighbourhood committees, and most importantly a mass socialist party of the working class, so as to prosecute the struggle for a workers’ government. It is for this program that the Socialist Equality Party fights.

This author also recommends:

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[27 June 2011]

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