

Canada's Conservatives invoke back-to-work legislation to help airline extort concessions

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Bowing before the federal Conservative government's threat to introduce strikebreaking legislation, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) announced Tuesday afternoon that it had reached a tentative contract agreement with Air Canada covering 6,800 flight attendants and was, consequently, rescinding, a strike notice.

On Monday, Labor Minister Lisa Raitt had vowed that if the Air Canada flight attendants made good on their threat to walk off the job early Wednesday morning, the Conservatives would strip them of their rights to strike and bargain collectively. To add weight to this threat, the government initiated later that same day the procedural measures necessary to ram strikebreaking legislation through Parliament.

No details of the proposed contract agreement have been released. However, there is no question but that the union has abandoned the demands of its members so as to avert a strike that from the get-go would have constituted a challenge to, and posed the necessity of prosecuting a struggle against the Conservative government.

Raitt, for her part, crowed over CUPE's withdrawal of its strike threat, declaring it justified the government's pre-emptive action: "The objective of the legislation that we put on notice yesterday has been achieved and we are so very pleased that air service for Canadians will be protected."

Over the past decade, CUPE and the other unions representing workers at Air Canada, the country's largest airline, have repeatedly negotiated concession contracts. As a result, workers' real wages have been cut on the order of 10 percent and their workload significantly increased.

Last month CUPE reached a tentative agreement with Air Canada, only to have it massively rejected by the

rank-and-file. 87.8 percent of flight attendants voted against the proposed deal and, in a subsequent vote, 98 percent endorsed strike action.

The flight attendants rejected the tentative agreement because it failed to address their concerns over deteriorating working conditions, especially long hours, and gave the airline the right to establish a low-cost subsidiary with the purported aim of competing more aggressively for the charter vacation-travel business. In return for allowing it to undercut the wages and working conditions of CUPE's existing Air Canada members, the airline said it would recognize CUPE as the bargaining representative of the flight attendants at its new subsidiary.

The defeated agreement also included regressive changes to the pension plan, including the creation of a separate, inferior plan for new hires.

In the past four months, Canada's new majority Conservative government has thrice initiated legislation to criminalize workers' job action.

In June the Conservatives forced a quick end to a strike by Air Canada customer service agents by vowing to adopt a strikebreaking law. Only days later, the government enacted legislation outlawing a strike by 48,000 Canada Post workers. That law is crafted so as to ensure that the government-appointed arbitrator charged with dictating the contract under which the postal workers will work for the next four years is legally compelled to impose the sweeping concessions sought by management. It also imposed a wage settlement inferior even to that offered by Canada Post.

In arguing for last month's defeated tentative contract, Jeff Taylor, the president of CUPE's Air Canada component, argued that the union had no choice but to accept terms that fell far short of workers' needs because "the Conservative government will not

let us go on strike.’’

Now the union leadership will seek to browbeat the membership into ratifying the latest sellout agreement by pointing to the government’s intervention on behalf of Air Canada. And it will try to justify its refusal to mobilize the working class against the Conservative government by telling workers to support the coming to power of the New Democratic Party in an election four or five years hence.

The reality is that the social democrat NDP politicians are as committed as the Conservatives and Liberals to upholding the imperatives of capitalism—that workers’ wages and working conditions must be subordinated to corporate competitiveness and investors’ profits.

In the face of the Conservatives’ threat to use legislation to criminalize any job action by Air Canada flight attendants, the trade union-based New Democratic Party refused to say whether it would try to impede the law’s speedy passage through parliamentary procedural maneuvers. In the hours prior to Tuesday’s tentative contact settlement, the NDP leadership was clearly in a quandary, fearing even a display of token opposition would undercut its determined effort to convince Canada’s ruling elite that it can supplant the Liberals as its “left” party of government.

In June Canada’s newly minted Official Opposition held up passage of Bill C-8, the draconian legislation targeting postal workers, for several days. The NDP filibuster was a gesture aimed at assisting the leadership of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) in diffusing workers’ anger and corralling them back to work. But the NDP’s stand elicited much angry comment from the big business press.

The Conservatives’ aggressive intervention against the Air Canada workers and the postal workers before them has broad and chilling implications. Under conditions where the ruling elite is moving to impose sweeping cuts in public services, in the name of eliminating government deficits, and employers, citing ever-increasing foreign competition, are moving to abolish guaranteed pensions and other basic rights, the Harper government has demonstrated that it will use the full force of the state to criminalize and suppress workers’ resistance.



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