

Wildcat strike at Air Canada outrages and unnerves ruling elite

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An editorial published Tuesday by the *Globe and Mail*, Canada's "newspaper of record" and the traditional mouthpiece of the banks and stock exchange, underscores that the ruling elite is intent on criminalizing all forms of worker opposition and dissent. The editorial hails the state suppression of a wildcat strike at Air Canada—a wildcat occasioned by the government's stripping Air Canada workers of their collective bargaining rights—and demands stern action be taken against three workers who had the temerity to "hand-clap" the country's Labour Minister.

Last Friday hundreds of Air Canada flights were delayed and 210 more cancelled outright after 150 baggage handlers, ramp workers and maintenance personnel at Toronto's Pearson International Airport staged wildcat strike action. Members of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAMAW), the Toronto workers were quickly joined by ground crews in Montreal, Quebec City and Vancouver causing widespread chaos across the entire Air Canada network. Over one third of Air Canada's daily passenger traffic was impacted by the dispute.

That scores of workers centrally placed at the heart of the country's air transportation grid should flout the Conservatives' latest anti-strike law and defy the policing efforts of the union bureaucracy outraged and unnerved the *Globe* editorialists. But there was more. They reserved especial vitriol for "the vindictive discourtesy" of three Air Canada baggage handlers whose "slow, rhythmic (hand) clapping" had started the whole affair.

A look at the events leading up to the airport walkouts shed a chilling light on just how Canada's ruling elite currently perceives the right to dissent.

On the evening of March 22, Lisa Raitt, the Minister for Labour in the right-wing government of Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper, was passing through Toronto airport. Over the past nine months, Raitt has drawn the ire of Air Canada ground crews, not to mention

pilots, flight attendants and customer service representatives organized in other unions, by repeatedly authoring anti-strike laws and referrals to the Canada Industrial Relations Board (CIRB) aimed at thwarting worker job action, preventing workers from regaining the massive concessions wrested from them at the beginning of the last decade, and imposing further concessions. The new concessions include a two-tier pension scheme and the creation of a low-wage spin-off charter-vacation carrier.

Earlier this month, Raitt illegalized job actions by 8,600 Air Canada ground crew workers and 3,000 pilots through a spurious request to the CIRB to rule on whether a strike or lockout would endanger the "health and safety" of Canadians. Soon after, the Conservatives rammed legislation through parliament "suspending" the workers' right to strike. The anti-strike law includes language crafted so as to ensure the government-appointed arbitrators who will now determine the workers' terms of employment impose Air Canada's concession demands. It stipulates that the new contracts must "ensure the short and long-term viability and competitiveness" of the company and guarantee "the sustainability of the employer's pension plan," a euphemism for pension cuts, increased worker contributions, and the introduction of a defined-contribution scheme for low-seniority workers.

Raitt made similar pro-company interventions against Air Canada customer service agent workers last June, using the threat of a government-imposed settlement to bully the CAW into a last minute concessions deal, and against flight attendants when they threatened to strike last October.

On March 22, as Raitt was met by the airport VIP concierge, a small group of baggage handlers at the luggage carousel spotted the minister and started a mock "congratulatory" slow hand-clap then, continuing their

sarcastic applause, followed her down an escalator. According to a statement from Bill Trbovich, an IAMAW official, a visibly upset Raitt told her RCMP security escort to “arrest these animals.” Raitt then got into a waiting car and left, after which the protestors dispersed.

Shortly after the incident, three baggage handlers who had been identified as “hand-clappers” were given 72 hour suspensions by Air Canada management. When word spread about these victimizations to on-duty ground crews throughout the airport, workers walked off the job late Thursday night and into Friday morning. Immediately, thirty-seven wildcat strikers identified by management were summarily fired. By sunrise on Friday morning, the wildcat action had spread to other major Canadian hubs.

The incident with Raitt was simply the straw that broke the camel’s back. Wildcatters gathering at the entrance to the airport complained of the government’s attack on their right-to-strike, of repeated concessionary contracts and of intolerable working conditions. A leaflet passed out in the airport stated, “The use of forced overtime and the systematic and persistent discipline of employees without due process with the heavy handed tactics they use to intimidate and demoralise workers must cease.”

Even before daylight, union officials had issued statements to the press, assuring the government and the travelling public that they had nothing to do with the walkout, did not sanction or support the action and acknowledged its illegality. The office of Lisa Raitt similarly went into action, releasing a statement that “law enforcement agencies have been contacted, and will be deployed if necessary.” Striking workers vowed to stay off the job until all the suspended and fired employees were reinstated.

Fourteen hours after the dispute began the company obtained a court injunction that was also backed by a labour relations board “cease and desist” order. As workers booed, their own union representatives read out the order to return to work. Threatened with thousand dollar a day fines, criminal charges and possible termination, the strikers ended their action. Initially they were told that there would be no repercussions against participants in the incident, but it was subsequently revealed that the union and management must agree to hand down “appropriate” punishment to the three hand-clappers. Should they fail to do so, the labour board will impose its own sanctions against the workers. Union members were seen screaming at their own officials when this betrayal was revealed.

This is far from the first time union officials have come into open conflict with Air Canada workers. Over the past nine months the unions representing Air Canada service agents, pilots and flight attendants have all agreed to concession contracts, only to have them voted down in favour of industrial action.

With job action illegalized by government and squelched by the unions, rebellious workers are turning to rank-and-file action. Only a week prior to the ground crews’ wildcat strike, pilots staged a coordinated “sick out” that disrupted scores of Air Canada flights.

In its Tuesday editorial, the *Globe and Mail* approvingly quoted labour board judge Martin Teplitsky’s hysterical denunciation of the airport workers’ actions: “It does not take much imagination to picture a world in which everyone with a grievance or a complaint could address it through illegal self help,” he intoned. “We would be living in a jungle, not in a civilized democracy.” For Teplitsky and the *Globe* editors it is given that in a “civilized democracy” workers should be suspended for slow hand-clapping a government minister. Of course, neither the *Globe* nor Teplitsky felt it necessary to mention, let alone criticize, the government’s trampling on workers’ collective bargaining rights.

It was no coincidence that in the wake of these events, newspaper reporters sought out the advice of retired Canadian Auto Workers chief Buzz Hargrove who regularly opines that management must not overlook the value of the trade unions in policing the workplace and in times of crisis, corralling worker dissatisfaction into safe and controllable channels.

It is becoming more and more obvious to workers that their unions act as junior partners of the corporations and against their needs. Independent worker action—sick-outs, slow downs, wildcat strikes and occupations will become increasingly common. They must become fused into a conscious working class political movement directed against the entire legal and political apparatus that upholds the domination of big business—the courts, government and politicians, corporate media and pro-capitalist unions.



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