

Canadian government moves to outlaw railway strike

Carl Bronski
29 May 2012

The Conservative government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper introduced back-to-work legislation Monday afternoon to illegalize a nation-wide strike by Canadian Pacific (CP) railway engineers and conductors.

The 4,800 workers are fighting against company proposals for a massive cutback in pensions of up to 40 percent and the introduction of ever-more grueling schedules and work rules. The strike, organized by the Teamsters Canada Rail Conference union, is in its sixth day and has stopped shipments of grain, minerals, automobiles, fuel and other bulk goods transported by Canada's second largest freight carrier.

Last year, CP recorded over \$570 million in profits. Outgoing CEO Fred Green, who was recently purged by shareholders demanding an even higher increase in their return on investment, was granted an \$18 million severance package.

Only a few hours after the strike began last Wednesday, Labour Minister Lisa Raitt announced that she would outlaw the strike if it was ongoing when parliament resumed its sitting today. Full details of the penalties for defying the order have not yet been released but it is expected they will be comparable to sanctions threatened against Air Canada and Canada Post workers, which included fines of up to \$1,000 per day for individual workers and \$100,000 per day for the union. The Canada Post order also included instructions to the arbitrator to favourably consider the companies' bottom line requirements.

The current bill will be rammed through parliament Tuesday evening with only a few hours set aside in total for debate, committee referral, final reading and vote.

The Harper government's brazen attack on civil liberties is an expression of a global process. Facing growing popular resistance to their drive to place the burden of the capitalist crisis on the working class, governments are criminalizing all forms of industrial and social dissent and trampling on the most basic democratic rights.

While Harper and Raitt have virtually ended the right-to-strike by significant sections of the Canadian working class, big business politicians in the Quebec Liberal government of Premier Jean Charest have imposed sweeping attacks on the right to demonstrate, and have used mass arrests in an attempt to quell a strike by hundreds of thousands of students against tuition fee hikes.

In the face of these historic attacks, the trade union leaders and politicians of the New Democratic Party (NDP) have mouthed empty phrases about the "unfairness" of the corporations and various big business governments, but have refused to take measures to mobilize the working class as a whole against strike-breaking laws, contract concessions and social spending cuts. Indeed, in the case of the Quebec student strike, the NDP has pledged to remain "neutral," while stating that in relation to the CP strike there is not much the NDP can do because the government has a majority in parliament.

The Teamsters union has tamely agreed to contracts with reduced pension protection at Canadian National (CN) railway and other carriers. When the 2011 CN engineers' contract was negotiated, Teamsters Vice President Doug Finson received congratulations from Labour Minister Raitt for accepting terms allowing for a steady erosion of the company's pension commitments. CP management now points to the CN contract's inferior pension provisions as the benchmark in the current dispute.

Over the weekend, as the threat of anti-strike legislation loomed, reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site* visited two picket lines at CP's Toronto yard.

Upon arrival at one of the gates, a CP train was seen moving in the yard. "Look at that," said picketer Michael McKenzie. "Management's making up a train. They know the government is going to bail them out in a few days so they're staging for it. It's not the first one I've seen moving. We've sent in a complaint to Transport Canada but they haven't answered us. You won't see the media reporting that."

Sophie, a locomotive engineer with 25 years of seniority, is a third generation employee at Canadian Pacific. “I’m glad to see you down here,” she said. “The media never seems interested in getting the point of view of regular workers. All you hear is what the company and the government has to say. People should know what we have to go through doing this job. We work nights and weekends all the time, and we’re on call 24/7.

“The contract we have right now says we have to work ten hours a day, and now management says it should be 12 hours. But it’s not really twelve hours. It’s more like 15 or 16 because when we reach the limit, we just get put off the train. It doesn’t matter where you are; at a siding or just somewhere out there along the tracks. Then you might have to wait three or four hours for somebody to pick you up. Working for the company becomes your whole life. Half of us are divorced because it’s impossible to keep a decent family life together. That’s a big sacrifice to make. Everyone talks about the importance of family, but that just doesn’t happen with CP.

“So we have to put our lives on hold, just waiting for the pension. But they pull that rug out from under us too. They’re cutting it by up to 40 percent and capping it too so they can save money. But look what they did with this [Hunter] Harrison guy, the new CEO they brought in to cut everything back. He used to head CN [Canadian National railway], and then he retired. He had a contract that said he’d lose his pension and benefits if he went to work for a competitor, but when he came to CP they covered all of that for him.

“We can’t even get our pensions that we worked all our lives for. It’s like what they say, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.”

Asked what she thought of the government’s threat to issue back-to-work legislation, Sophie said, “This government doesn’t want anybody to be able to fight back. Look at what they did at Canada Post and Air Canada. I think the company and the union are just waiting for the order to end the strike. I haven’t heard a thing about any plan to go further than that. They’ve been negotiating since October. Everybody saw the other strikes getting ended by the government, but we haven’t heard a word about what we’d do if the order comes down to go back to work.”

Jim is a railway engineer and has been working with CP since 1972. “We just want the public to understand why we’re striking. The message seems to be getting mixed up. To announce within eight hours of the beginning of the strike that you’re going to legislate us back to work, does that create a fair playing field? Does that create an opportunity for the company

to bargain in good faith, when they know the legislation has already been prepared and they pretty much even know the day it’s going to be implemented?”

Tammy is a locomotive engineer as well and expressed her anger at the company. “How would you feel if they were taking 40 percent of your future away? The union went to the company and offered to protect the commuters, and the company turned them down. The media states that the company is the hero in that situation. The media so far as what I’ve read is very misleading. We want the company to understand that they cannot continue to get rich off our backs while making us poorer.”

Brenda, whose husband is on strike, holds the government responsible for crippling the strike. “As soon as the union gave strike notice, the Wheat Board, the Potash Board, they all wrote to the Harper government and told them not to let us go on strike. You go straight to the government. They don’t put pressure on the company you deal with to treat their workers fairly, they go straight to the government to bail you out.”

Frank, also a conductor, expressed his solidarity by refusing his pay. “I wish that the media would know that I worked operating the commuter GO train this weekend for free, because that’s the agreement we made as a union, and I’m not going to get paid if my brothers and sisters are out here not getting paid.”

Tom is a train conductor with 27 years experience. “Especially since 2008 when the big crash happened, the one percent got their money back and left the rest of us in the turmoil that we’re in. Now the propaganda seems to be spun that anybody in the union, anybody that has good wages, good benefits, it’s their fault now. That ideology of divide and conquer is perpetrated by the people that are spinning it, by the one percent that control the media and the press, to blame us now.

“A lot of European countries are dealing with the same situation. You have the hierarchy of the upper class and the middle class traditionally which has shrunk in the last 20 years. So now you have the really poor, a small middle class, and still the guys at the top.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact