

Canadian government rams through anti-strike law against railway workers

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The Conservative government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Labour Minister Lisa Raitt has rammed through back-to-work legislation to outlaw an eight-day strike by 4,800 locomotive engineers and conductors at Canadian Pacific (CP) Railway. The bill was ultimately passed at 1:30 Wednesday morning. To ensure quick passage, the government invoked its majority to limit debate.

The entire process from first to third reading, debate, committee referral and final vote took only a few hours time. It marked a record 23rd occasion since the government was reelected last May in which closure on debate had been invoked. The bill will now go to the Conservative-controlled and unelected Senate where it is expected to be voted on and receive “Royal Assent” from the Governor-General by late Thursday.

Last Wednesday morning, the railway workers, organized by the Teamsters Canada Rail Conference union, went on strike against company demands to reduce pensions by up to 40 percent and increase the already grueling pace and length of work. The dangerous pace of work forced by management was tragically put on display when an accident claimed the life of American CP conductor Robert Glasgow early Monday morning. Glasgow, whose union was not on strike, was crushed between railcars just south of the border in North Dakota.

CP management had been banking on a government imposed settlement ever since negotiations opened with the Teamsters last October. Over the last year, the government has passed back-to-work legislation against Air Canada workers on two occasions and also at Canada Post. It has used the threat of such legislation to force settlements in two other disputes. Under these conditions, employers have taken the offensive against significant sections of the Canadian working class, demanding ever greater concessions, knowing full well that any strike will be short-lived and the dispute sent into the hands of a

Conservative-appointed arbitrator.

Within hours of the walkout last week, and after appeals from a variety of mining, manufacturing and agribusiness lobbyists, Raitt gave notice that she intended to table back-to-work legislation if a settlement was not reached by the time the federal parliament reconvened the following week.

The current strike has stopped shipments of fuel, grain, minerals, automobiles and other bulk goods that are transported along CP’s extensive rail network that stretches across Canada from Vancouver to Montreal and into the United States. But the Teamsters leadership has shown no interest in mobilizing the tremendous power of its membership—let alone the growing opposition amongst whole swathes of the population against austerity measures—to defy the government fiat.

After making the obligatory statements decrying the government’s “bully tactics”, union leaders immediately got down to the real business at hand—ensuring that its members can be herded back to the rail yards as effectively as possible while it ponders the list of possible government arbitrators. Indeed, so assured was Labour Minister Raitt with the union leadership’s acquiescence to her diktat that she did not feel it necessary to include any penalties for defiance of the law in the legislation.

Previous back-to-work orders against Air Canada and Canada Post workers 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 company’s bottom line requirements.

Management has already used the Teamster leadership’s previous subservience in contract negotiations to bolster its case for the current concessions. In 2011, the Teamsters union agreed to contracts with reduced pension protection at Canadian National (CN) railway and other carriers.

The reaction of the New Democratic Party (NDP) opposition has similarly once again shown their own political bankruptcy. While arguing the obvious in several parliamentary speeches—that the government’s penchant for outlawing strikes plays into the hands of stonewalling management negotiators—they let it be known that nothing could be done in the face of a Conservative majority government. Indeed, the party even decided to dispense with its threat to hold up the legislation in parliament Tuesday night.

The Conservatives’ aggressive intervention against striking workers has broad and chilling implications. Under conditions where the ruling elite is moving to impose sweeping cuts in public services, 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.

At the same time as 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. This is an international phenomenon. 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.

If Canadian Pacific workers are not to suffer yet another bitter reversal, they must seize the leadership of their struggle from the Teamsters bureaucracy. Through the development of rank-and-file committees, organized outside and in opposition to the union apparatus, they must make their strike the spearhead of a working-class political and industrial offensive against all job and wage cuts and in defense of workers’ rights and public services.



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