

Canada's Conservatives threaten CN Rail workers with anti-strike law

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Only hours after Conservative Labour Minister Kellie Leitch had threatened to criminalize pending strike action, the Teamsters Railway Conference initialed a tentative contract with the country's largest railway company—Canadian National (CN)—late Wednesday night.

3,300 CN train engineers, yardmen and conductors had been poised to begin a nationwide strike on Saturday, February 8 that would have negatively impacted not only CN's share price and profit margins but those of many other corporations dependent on rail service.

The threat from the Labour Minister was only the latest volley in a government drive to effectively outlaw all forms of industrial and social dissent and trample on basic democratic rights. Since June 2011, the Conservative government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper has passed back-to-work legislation against striking railway workers at Canadian Pacific, against Canada Post workers, and on two occasions against Air Canada workers. It has used the threat of such legislation to force “settlements” in several other disputes. Under these conditions, employers have taken the offensive against significant sections of the working class, demanding ever-greater concessions, including the gutting of pensions, confident that they can rely on the government to legalize any worker resistance and to task an arbitrator to dictate the workers' terms of employment.

Indeed, such is the brazenness of the ruling class campaign to eviscerate worker rights that prior to the tentative settlement at CN, Saskatchewan Premier Brad Wall—a close ally of Harper—had called on the federal Conservative government to outlaw the impending strike even before any workers had walked off the job.

As it turned out, no such pre-emptive action was

required as the union quickly came to terms with CN management after Leitch's threat. The Teamsters' officialdom had no stomach for any confrontation with the company, let alone with the Harper government.

In the last contract, the Teamsters' negotiating team accepted a concessions-laden deal that gutted workers' pensions, curtailed benefits and increased the pace of work. Those concessions were then used as a template by Canadian Pacific management, CN's main competitor, in their own 2012 confrontation with CP workers.

In the current round of contract negotiations, the Teamsters again agreed to takeaways, reaching a tentative agreement with CN last October. But when the union took that “fully endorsed” deal to the membership, rail workers repudiated it. Citing the agreement's failure to properly safeguard workers against excessive hours and violations of re-scheduling protocols, they voted 67 percent to reject it.

In a February 4 letter to CN management, the Teamsters leadership reported that the contract rejection had “brought to (its) attention massive distrust ... leading to unwillingness to enter into scheduled environments and incredible dissatisfaction with respect to the multitude of violations of, inter alia, the rest clauses of the collective agreements.” Clearly no such “distrust” existed between management and the union at the bargaining table. That “incredible dissatisfaction” concerning over-work and speed-up needed to be “brought to (the union's) attention” by the rejection of a contract it had enthusiastically endorsed speaks volumes about the enormous gulf that exists between the workers and their purported union representatives.

As no details of the latest CN-Teamster deal have been released, it is unclear if anything more than

cosmetic changes have been made to a proposed agreement CN workers rejected last fall or if the union—ever determined to maintain the company’s “competitive position”—has “traded” other concessions for improvements in scheduling.

Canada’s unions, it should be noted, have a long record of using the government’s suspension of workers’ rights, or its threat to do so, to push through concessions contracts. Invariably workers are told that a “negotiated settlement” is preferable to one imposed by an arbitrator. Needless to say, the unions and their NDP allies are adamant that any defiance of the government’s threats and the mobilization of the working class in opposition to big business and state attacks is unthinkable.

Voting on the tentative agreement will not be concluded for another month and a half. A statement from CN management shows, however, that the company and the union remain close partners. Congratulating the union bureaucrats for averting a strike, Jim Vena, CN’s vice-president and chief operating officer, stated, “CN has offered to work closely with the union leadership to explain the terms of the agreement to union members over the next 45 days to help ensure a successful ratification of the agreement.”

CN workers should place absolutely no faith in the coming appeals from both the union and management and should begin to organize rank-and-file committees independent of the union apparatus to prepare for an all-out struggle against the company and its Conservative government allies.

On the same day that the Teamsters were bowing to the Harper government’s anti-strike threats, an investigative report by the Canadian Broadcast Company (CBC) showed that issues of rail safety are constantly subordinated by the rail bosses and the government to profit maximization.

The CBC report revealed how freight carriers had asked the government to remove the requirement to inspect railcars carrying dangerous goods just one month before last July’s horrific train derailment and explosion at Lac Megantic, Quebec that incinerated 47 townspeople. Although the rail companies quickly withdrew their request in the wake of the tragedy, it has been revealed that for years the government has secretly granted them special exemptions from safety

regulations.

The report has alarmed populations living along railroad tracks and central marshalling areas. The CBC reported the comments of the mayor of one such area, Mike Bradley of Sarnia, Ontario, a city located at the centre of the country’s petrochemical, pipeline and railroad industries. He told reporters that cost-cutting and risk-taking were part and parcel of a strategy to increase shareholder profits at the expense of safety. “These railcars are rolling through the hearts of communities right across the country and the level of anxiety is very high. Transport Canada needs to become the watchdog, not the lapdog of the rail industry. My own observation from over the years is there’s almost an incestuous relationship between the industry, Transport Canada and the government of the day.”



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