

Citing government threats, Teamsters suppress Canadian Pacific rail strike

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Union officials from the Teamsters Canada Railway Conference (TCRC) capitulated to the Conservative government's threat of imminent strikebreaking legislation and ordered an end to a strike by 3,300 Canadian Pacific (CP) Railway locomotive engineers, conductors and yardmen Monday afternoon, little more than 36 hours after it began.

Under a deal sanctioned by Labour Minister Kellie Leitch, who had vehemently denounced the strike the day before, the Teamsters and CP Rail have agreed to "mediated arbitration" over all outstanding issues in the lapsed railway contract, removing any further threat of a job action. The crucial issues of scheduling, rail safety, rest management and all other unresolved contractual items will now be subject to mediated negotiations and ultimately, should no agreement be reached, binding arbitration.

On Sunday, TCRC President Douglas Finnison responded to the government's announcement that it would be introducing legislation Monday to criminalize the strike with the bluster that is the stock in trade of the union officialdom the world over. He declared, "The pre-emptive actions by the government to minimize the workers' voices, minimize the workers' right to collectively bargain their own working conditions, and to clearly favour the employer... are a crucial wake-up call for Canadian workers." Finnison then vowed, "Not fighting is simply not an option the Teamsters are willing to accept. If that means it gets uncomfortable for the government or their corporate friends, too bad!"

But by Monday the union was doing the Conservatives' bidding and shutting down the strike without the government even having to table a back-to-work bill in Parliament.

The Teamsters had absolutely no intention of fighting the government's anti-democratic attack, let alone the gruelling, unsafe work schedules that CP has demanded to further boost profits and shareholder value.

From the outset, it was clear that the CP Rail workers faced a battle not only with their employer, Canada's second largest rail company, but also with Stephen Harper's Conservative government, which has criminalized one strike

after another. Yet the union did everything to demobilize the workers and confine their struggle within the most narrow collective bargaining framework.

In 2012, the Harper government had rushed to CP Rail's support and illegalized a strike by the engineers and conductors. The Teamsters responded then by ordering immediate compliance.

Three years on, the same issues of forced overtime and lack of rest days remain on the table, CP Rail having had its way over the three-year life of the just lapsed concessionary contract.

Over the weekend, the TCRC had already come to an agreement with Canadian National (CN), the other major Canadian railway, thereby precluding any common struggle against Canada's two rail giants. So as to further divide the two groups of workers, the Teamsters have colluded with management to delay release of the full terms of their deal with CN and put off the contract ratification vote until mid-April.

Union officials with Unifor, which represents 1,800 track maintenance workers at CP, also worked to isolate the CP Rail engineers and conductors. Although they were in a legal position to strike alongside the train drivers and yardmen, Unifor ordered their membership to remain on the job after negotiating a separate contract deal with CP late Saturday night.

As for the Canadian Labour Congress, the country's principal labor organization, it didn't even issue a press release denouncing the government's moves to illegalize a strike by one of its affiliates.

The trade union-backed New Democratic Party (NDP) issued a statement Monday afternoon that stated the obvious—that the government's penchant for outlawing strikes bolsters the hand of stonewalling management negotiators. But the NDP let it be known nothing could be done in the face of a Conservative majority government.

The reality is that both the pro-capitalist unions and social democratic politicians are opposed to any worker defiance of the battery of Conservative anti-union laws. They rightly

fear it could serve as the catalyst for a working class offensive against the corporate assault on wages, working conditions and public services and threaten the profitability and “competitiveness” of Canadian big business.

Yesterday’s sorry events are only the latest in a long line of cases where the unions have used either the passage or imminent threat of strikebreaking legislation to justify their suppression of a militant struggle.

In addition to the long list of strikes the Harper government has criminalized or threatened to criminalize over the past four years—including walkouts at Canada Post, Air Canada and CN Rail—various provincial governments have repeatedly illegalized job actions. Quebec’s Parti Quebecois government, with the full support of the then-Liberal official opposition, illegalized a strike by 80,000 construction workers in the summer of 2013, and Ontario’s Liberal government (which was then being propped up by the NDP) outlawed job action by public school teachers and imposed wage-cutting contracts earlier that same year.

The Harper government has also stripped tens of thousands of federal public employees of the right to strike under new essential services legislation.

On every occasion, the unions and the NDP have quickly moved back to business-as-usual with the employers and governments involved.

In a speech to parliament Monday, Labour Minister Kellie Leitch insisted that the strike had to be immediately halted in order to prevent dire economic consequences for companies dependent on rail freight transport. But even as she spoke, a CN train carrying crude oil from Alberta was still burning in Northern Ontario, two days after it had derailed, blocking the tracks and stopping all east-west train traffic for both major Canadian railroads.

Frequent rail accidents only highlight the unsafe and precarious nature of the rail industry as it pushes more and more precarious cargo in ever longer, heavier trains manned by over-worked crews.

Canadian Pacific management clearly banked on the Harper government’s support in the current negotiations. The company is well known for its rabid cost-cutting measures. A recent study showed a 39 percent increase in personal injuries on the job and a 25 percent spike in train accidents since the government forced an end to the 2012 strike.

Earlier that year, the railway was taken over by an activist hedge fund, Pershing Square Capital Management. Run by Bill Ackman, Pershing ousted the CEO and replaced him with E. Hunter Harrison, a railroad manager notorious for imposing cuts and “efficiencies” to quickly boost shareholder prices. Shortly after Harrison took over, the layoff of 1,700 workers was announced, with a total of 4,500

jobs to be cut by 2016. On the news of the layoffs, CP’s stock price immediately rose to all-time highs.

Harrison previously headed Canadian National. There he was known for running longer and heavier trains to cut the number of crews that were needed, resulting in several derailments of long trains that spilled chemicals into waterways in British Colombia and elsewhere. At CP, Harrison is pursuing a similar strategy. Trains have been cut or made longer to reduce the number of crews needed. Staff at yards and terminals have been cut and some yards closed. Capital spending—improving track, signalling and equipment—has been curtailed.

While the government and its ostensible parliamentary “opponents” preside over the decimation of jobs, living standards and working conditions to boost the profits of corporations, they have been aided and abetted all down the line by the trade unions. For them, no lie to their memberships is too big, no tactical maneuver to divide workers too difficult, and no sellout too outrageous.

Workers must draw a lesson from this most recent betrayal. The trade unions today are pro-company organizations dedicated to keeping the wheels of capitalist commerce running at the expense of their members’ livelihoods.

Workers must take the fight to defend themselves out of the hands of the trade unions and form independent, rank-and-file committees to pursue their demands. Above all, what is required is an understanding of the fundamental *political* questions at stake—that to secure their interests, workers must embark on a path aimed at taking political power and reorganizing society internationally on the basis of socialist principles.



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