

Unions demobilize Canadian railway workers

Carl Bronski
26 February 2015

A threatened lockout by Canadian National Railway's management of 4,800 safety inspectors and rail maintenance workers was averted late Monday night when Unifor officials and company negotiators reached an eleventh-hour tentative contract settlement.

With the signing of the deal, all major sections of the over 11,000-strong unionized workforce at Canada's two major railways—Canadian National (CN) and Canadian Pacific (CP)—have either been forced into binding arbitration or been covered by recently initialed tentative agreements.

No details of the proposed CN contract will be released until Unifor members vote on the agreement over the next three weeks. However, it can be said without fear of contradiction that the Unifor-CN agreement will not reverse any of the major concessions the union has made in previous deals. CN shares rose on the Toronto Stock Exchange in early morning trading after the announcement of the settlement. The railway, which consistently posts multi-billion-dollar annual profits, has already recorded one of the strongest growth and earnings ratings of any Canadian company over the past year.

While Canada's Conservative government did not publicly threaten to introduce legislation ordering an end to any disruption of CN's operations, illegalizing any future job action by the CN safety inspectors and rail maintenance workers, and imposing binding arbitration, it hardly needed do so. Time and again, Stephen Harper's Conservative government has intervened to "suspend" workers' right to strike or threatened to do so. Just in the past four years, the government has criminalized strikes by Canada Post, Air Canada and CP Rail workers. It has also permanently stripped tens of thousands of federal government employees of the right to strike under a new essential services law.

Only last week the Conservative government threatened to again criminalize a strike by 3,300 CP Rail engineers, conductors and yardmen, and publicly vilified the striking workers for destabilizing the Canadian economy. In the face of this threat, the Teamsters union quickly

capitulated and agreed to binding arbitration. (See: Citing government threats, Teamsters suppress Canadian Pacific rail strike)

CN's own lockout threat was clearly made with the intention of precipitating government intervention. Labour Minister Kellie Leitch, for her part, chose to wait and see if Unifor could be cowed without the government having to take center stage.

Over the weekend, Unifor President Jerry Dias quickly moved to demonstrate that the last thing he wanted was a confrontation with the Harper government. He held direct talks on Sunday with CN's president and pledged that even in the event of a lockout he would instruct his members to ensure passenger traffic in Montreal—where CN has commuter tracks—would not be disrupted.

The outcome and logistics of the several railway contract negotiations underscore the role that the trade unions play today in enforcing "labour peace" even as Canadian corporations wage an all-out offensive on the living standards, jobs and working conditions of workers across the country.

Only ten days ago, contracts for 1,800 Unifor inspectors and rail maintenance workers and 3,300 Teamsters Canada Railway Conference (TCRC) locomotive engineers at CP plus another 1,800 Teamsters locomotive engineers at CN were being negotiated at various bargaining tables. Added to this equation was the expired Unifor-CN contract encompassing another 4,800 workers.

In all cases, the railways were intent on upholding and expanding the concessions they have pried from workers in recent years—concessions that have allowed them to impose a brutal work-regime, including for many workers 12-hour days, and squeeze ever larger profits from a shrinking workforce.

Yet there was never any question of uniting railway workers in struggle against CN and CP, let alone joining their struggle with those of locked-out US West Coast longshoremen and striking US oil refinery workers. The longshoremen's lockout had in fact created serious bottlenecks in freight transport in Canada, as US shippers

moved cargo to the increasingly overloaded Canadian port of Vancouver and thereby placed railway workers in an economically even more critical and powerful position.

The unions did everything to divide the workers by union bargaining unit and company. As the CP engineers and yardmen were preparing to strike on the evening of Feb. 14, action that put them on a collision course with the hated Harper government, Unifor came to CP Rail's aid by signing a tentative contract deal on behalf of 1,800 CP inspectors and rail maintenance workers. The Teamsters union meantime initialed a contract deal with CN Rail on behalf of 1,800 CN engineers.

While the Unifor CP Rail workers had themselves been in a legal strike position as of midnight on Feb. 14, the union had failed to take the requisite steps to place its members at CN in a position to legally strike alongside them. Yet at the latter company, just as at CP, there had been months of fruitless negotiations.

In a statement issued last weekend CN Rail management itself expressed some puzzlement that Unifor, while long complaining negotiations were at an impasse, had not deigned to consult its membership on a strike mandate.

So as to further divide the workers at CN and CP, the release of the full terms of last week's Teamsters' deal with CN and the contract ratification vote are being delayed until April. No doubt cognizant of the experience with their last contract, Teamsters officials have left themselves plenty of time to try to ram through the agreement. In 2014, when the union took another "fully endorsed" deal to the membership, rail workers repudiated it. Citing the contract's failure to properly safeguard workers against excessive hours and violations of rest-scheduling protocols, they voted 67 percent to reject it.

As for the Canadian Labour Congress, the country's principal labor organization, it didn't so much as issue a press release to denounce the government's moves to legalize the short-lived, February 14-15 CP Teamsters' strike.

New Democratic Party (NDP) leader Thomas Mulcair similarly issued no statement on the CP strike and Harper's pending legislation, nor on CN's threat to lock out the Unifor workers. The trade union-backed NDP views support for industrial action as an electrified third rail in national politics. In the face of historic attacks on the right to strike, the social democrats occasionally mouth empty phrases about "unfairness," but like the union leaders they are utterly opposed to any defiance of

the strikebreaking laws.

The last thing the trade unions want is the mass mobilization of their members in an open challenge to the dictates of big business and the Canadian state. The actions by Unifor and the Teamsters over the past ten days only underscore that the trade unions today serve only to demobilize and block worker resistance and police the diktats of big business.

It is now some 18 months since the creation of Unifor—the country's largest industrial union and arguably its most politically influential—as a result of the merger of the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) and the Communication, Energy and Paperworkers (CEP) unions. At the time, the merger was hailed as an "exciting new beginning" by numerous representatives of the pseudo-left, from Sam Gindin, himself a former CAW official and leader of the "Socialist Project," to Naomi Klein and "Fightback," an ostensible Marxist group that tenaciously upholds the authority of the NDP.

Instead, as the *World Socialist Web Site* warned, the new union has served not as an instrument of working class struggle but as a bureaucratic apparatus for suppressing any fight against concessions contracts and government austerity and for politically subordinating the working class to the parties of big business.

Last spring, Unifor played a leading role in rallying union support around the re-election of the big business Liberal government of Kathleen Wynne. Union president Jerry Dias, like most Canadian union bureaucrats, is now directing his energies to promoting the election of the pro-austerity federal Liberal party of Justin Trudeau or possibly a Liberal-NDP coalition government. As Dias said last September, when announcing that his union's chief 2015 priority is the electoral defeat of Harper, "If my choice is Stephen Harper or Justin Trudeau, then that's a no-brainer."



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact