

The Canadian Union of Postal Workers, the pseudo-left, and the “Anybody but Harper” campaign

Roger Jordan
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In the lead-up to Canada’s October 19 federal election, the trade union bureaucracy and the pseudo-left are uniting in an “Anybody but Conservative” campaign.

In the name of defeating Prime Minister Stephen Harper and his right-wing government, this campaign seeks to corral workers into supporting an alternate bourgeois government formed by the official opposition New Democrats (NDP), the big business Liberals, or a coalition of the two. Coming to power under conditions of the greatest crisis of capitalism since the Great Depression of the 1930s, such a government would be a regime of capitalist austerity, war and social reaction.

The unions’ “anybody but Harper” campaign is part of their efforts to suppress the class struggle and prevent the development of an independent political movement of the working class aimed at providing a socialist solution to the capitalist crisis.

Mike Palecek, National President of the 50,000-strong Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) is currently leading a cross-country tour to promote the “Anybody but Conservative” message.

Speaking at a rally in Calgary on August 12, Palecek vowed that he would follow Harper around the country to raise the issue of Canada Post’s cost-cutting, including its 2013 announcement that it is phasing out all home mail delivery by 2018. “At this point we’re asking people to vote for home mail delivery,” declared Palecek.

“I’m not here to tell you who to vote for,” he continued. “But I am here to tell you that if Stephen Harper is re-elected, you’re not going to have the same public postal service that you’ve been able to count on in the past.”

Like the union bureaucracy as a whole, which is sponsoring various anti-Conservative ad campaigns including the Engage Canada website, the CUPW leader is aiming to exploit deepening public anger at the growth in social inequality and attacks on public services to advance the privileged interests of top union bureaucrats at the expense of workers.

By helping bring a more “progressive” government to power in Ottawa, the unions hope to cement their corporatist working relations with big business and the state and to contain the mounting opposition within the working class to the attacks on jobs, wages and public services. (See: “Unions join Liberals, NDP in ‘Anybody but Conservative’ campaign”)

CUPW’s “anybody but Harper” election drive is a continuation of its “save Canada Post” campaign, which claims that postal workers can defend their jobs, wages and working conditions through appeals and protests to the political representative of big business.

In 2013, Canada Post released a five-year business plan containing proposals for between 6,000 and 8,000 job cuts, the abandonment of home delivery, sharp increases to mailing costs, and the privatization of post offices.

In response, CUPW launched a “coast-to-coast” campaign to “save

Canada Post.” This initiative fully accepted the principle that state-owned Canada Post should be run as a profit-making concern and merely politely suggested a series of alternative measures to promote this. The centrepiece of CUPW’s campaign, then as now, is for Canada Post to enter the financial services sector by creating a postal bank.

Writing in 2013, the *World Socialist Web Site* warned that CUPW is pursuing a “reactionary pipedream”:

“Reactionary because it separates the struggle against the cuts at Canada Post from the struggle to defend all public services and accepts the logic and framework of the capitalist system—the subordination of workers’ jobs and wages to corporate profit. A pipedream because Canada’s political elite and the big banks to which they are beholden will not entertain any such scheme. Indeed, the ruling class welcome Canada Post’s fiscal crisis as an opportunity: an opportunity to slash public services and to impose cuts in pensions and other concessions on a section of workers historically associated with militant struggles, with a view to intimidating the entire working class.”

CUPW has never sought to appeal for support from other sections of workers confronting the consequences of the broad assault on public services being waged by the ruling elite with the full backing of all the political parties. Its campaign instead fosters illusions in the prospect of a Liberal or NDP government taking steps to defend public services and the wages and jobs of the workers who administer them.

On its website, CUPW hails the Liberal government of Jean Chretien for having introduced, shortly after it came to power in October 1993, a “moratorium” on the program of post office closures implemented by the previous Mulroney Conservative government.

CUPW neglects to inform postal workers that this was the same Liberal government that over the next four years, implemented the greatest social spending cuts in Canadian history, including savage cuts to health care, post-secondary education, and unemployment insurance, and outlawed the 1997 postal workers’ strike. Moreover, under the Chretien Liberals the privatization of Canada Post continued, if at a somewhat slower pace.

CUPW also carefully avoids mention of the 2008 abortive coalition agreement between the Liberals and NDP to topple the Conservatives. The agreement pledged that a Liberal-NDP government would make “fiscal responsibility its first principle,” slash corporate taxes by \$50 billion over five years, and wage war in Afghanistan through 2011.

In 2011, Canada Post collaborated closely with the newly-elected Conservative majority government to enforce a lockout of 48,000 employees in response to a program of rotating walkouts organized by the CUPW. The toothless protests were deliberately designed to cause the least inconvenience to Canada Post so as to avoid triggering a broader confrontation with the Conservative government.

Recalling the roles played by all of the major parties in subsequent

events should dispel any lingering illusions among postal workers as to the viability of CUPW's current promotion of the NDP and Liberals as their allies. When the Conservatives introduced strikebreaking legislation, the Liberals announced they would do nothing to impede its speedy passage. As for the NDP, it mounted a brief filibuster. The purpose of this action was not to assist in mobilizing the working class to support postal workers in defying the Conservative legislation, but rather to assist the CUPW leadership in herding postal workers back on the job.

Once it felt assured that there was no danger of workers defying the back-to-work order, the CUPW national executive asked the NDP to lift its brief filibuster and then voted unanimously to order workers to comply with the legislation.

The NDP, it need be added, has an unbroken record of demanding workers submit to anti-worker laws.

At the time of the 2011 strike, Palecek enthused over the CUPW's rotating walkouts, describing them as an example of "creative tactics," and applauded the NDP for its brief filibuster, claiming that it had "fought against the (back-to-work) legislation tooth-and-nail."

He also provided a ringing endorsement of the right-wing Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), writing in an article in May 2011, "the Canadian Labour Congress unveiled an action plan at its convention in Vancouver to launch an escalating campaign of mass demonstrations and direct actions against Harper's government. The plan specifically mentions CUPW's upcoming battle and vowed support for the posties."

In truth, the CLC took no action to support postal workers, serving instead as a key mechanism to enforce the government's reactionary back-to-work legislation. This was no isolated episode, but rather merely one example of the criminal role the unions have played in demobilizing workers in the face of the onslaught led by the Conservative federal government and provincial governments led by all three major parties across the country. Strikes at CP Rail in 2012 and earlier this year, as well as by teachers in Ontario, were also outlawed by the Tories and Ontario Liberals, prompting no resistance from the NDP or unions.

The election of the left-talking, self-avowed militant Palecek as CUPW president in May reflected, albeit in a distorted manner, the growing discontent among postal workers over the union's failure to wage any serious struggle against Canada Post's assault on their jobs and working conditions.

But Palecek has wasted no time in demonstrating his intention to pursue the same ruinous course. Not only has he become a key spokesman for the "anybody but Harper," campaign, he has also made it clear that he will do nothing to prepare for defiance of the anti-strike laws that government across the country are systematically employing to criminalize worker resistance.

In an interview on the eve of his election as CUPW president with the RankandFile.ca website, Palecek cautioned that challenging back-to-work legislation is "a high-stakes game, and there is no easy answer that is applicable to every situation." He then declared, "The rest of the labour movement must be ready to stand up to the government, and rank and file workers have to be ready to go the distance. ... I have a good idea of what it takes to force a government to back down, and have promised our members I am willing to lead them as far as they are willing to go."

Palecek thus makes any resistance to strike-breaking legislation contingent on the "unity" of the labour movement composed of trade unions, which have systematically suppressed the class struggle for the past three decades, imposing concessions and time and again scuttling powerful strikes and social movements when they threatened to provoke a mass working class upsurge (eg., the 1983 Operation Solidarity strike in BC, the 1995-97 anti-Harris movement in Ontario and the 2012 Quebec student strike.) The fact that Palecek is now leading the CUPW's "Anybody but Conservative" campaign is politically significant given his history as a leading member of the pseudo-left Fightback group.

Although, Palecek was a regular contributor on trade union issues for the *Fightback* magazine and web site until last year, it has not published any report on his election last May to the CUPW presidency or otherwise said anything about its current relations with him.

Similarly, Palecek has not seen fit to provide any explanation as to why he no longer figures as a *Fightback* contributor.

All this strongly suggests that Palecek concluded that Fightback, the Canadian affiliate of the misnamed International Marxist Tendency, constituted political baggage hindering his pursuit of the main chance—i.e. his rise through the union bureaucracy.

As for Fightback, its silence on Palecek's evolution denotes approval of his rotten politics, as well as its desire to keep the door open to further opportunist collaboration with CUPW's new president. While in a recent article, *Fightback* editor Alex Grant made a vague critique of union leaders advocating "anybody but Conservative," a reference to Palecek and the CUPW was conspicuously absent. Fightback's entire orientation is fully in keeping with CUPW's anti-Conservative initiative, based as it is on the preposterous claim that the NDP can be pressured to the left and to adopt socialist policies. (See: Canada's pseudo-left Fightback promotes trade unions and NDP)

Postal workers seeking to resist the destruction of their jobs and privatization of the postal service must decisively reject the right-wing policies of the union bureaucracy and their apologists in pseudo-left groups like Fightback. Their struggle cannot advance one inch through bankrupt appeals to the ruling class and their political parties, whether Conservative, Liberal or NDP. Instead, workers must take control of the struggle to defend Canada Post out of the hands of the union bureaucrats and seek support from other sections of public sector workers confronting attacks by the federal and provincial governments, from autoworkers facing the threat of concessions contracts and plant shutdowns, and from workers internationally suffering the consequences of the bourgeoisie's global assault on the working class.

Above all, breaking out of the isolation imposed by CUPW and the entire trade union bureaucracy requires the adoption by postal workers of a new perspective to defend their interests based on a socialist and internationalist program.



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