

Canada Post preparing to lock out 50,000 workers

Roger Jordan
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With less than two weeks to go before the July 2 expiry of the current collective agreement at Canada Post, the management of the government-owned Crown Corporation is brazenly preparing to lock out its more than fifty thousand letter carriers, postal clerks, mail-sorters, and truck drivers.

Conciliation between the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) and Canada Post ended June 10, with the company insisting that massive contract concessions are required to maintain profitability under conditions of declining mail volume. Management has since taken the provocative step of announcing that all healthcare benefits for employees and their families will be halted as soon as the contract expires, while warning its large customers to make plans for service disruptions.

Management is demanding sweeping givebacks including: the elimination of the defined benefit pension scheme and its replacement by a defined contributions model; the weakening of job security guarantees so they apply only to workers with ten years' continuous service rather than the current five; major attacks on healthcare benefits; a pay freeze for temporary workers throughout the lifetime of the new collective agreement; and the elimination of the paid meal period for employees.

Speaking with CBC, CUPW President Mike Palecek, a former leader of the pseudo-left Fightback group, admitted, "We are expecting Canada Post to lock us out."

Despite acknowledging this threat, CUPW and Palecek are doing nothing to mobilize postal workers and the working class for an industrial and political struggle against concessions and in defence of public services. Rather they are boosting illusions in the big business Liberal government and the courts.

In recent weeks, postal workers have participated in strike ballots organized by CUPW. But the union has no intention of calling a strike unless its hand is forced by the company.

The never-ending rounds of attacks on postal workers over the past quarter-century have turned Canada Post into a profitable concern. Just in the first quarter, generally the company's weakest, it took in over \$40 million. Canada Post is exploiting technological change—including the decline in letters and the growth of online shopping—to justify its calls for increased labour "flexibility" and other attacks on basic rights.

In the last round of negotiations in 2011, Canada Post succeeded in pushing through major concessions. CUPW confined postal workers to toothless rotating strike action even as the Conservative government urged Canada Post to impose a lockout and then legislated postal workers back to their jobs. Rather than defying the reactionary legislation, which served as a model for the anti-strike laws the Harper government imposed on other sections of striking workers, CUPW initiated a court challenge which took almost five years to reach a conclusion. In the meantime, CUPW capitulated to management's demands, citing the threat of a contract imposed by a government-appointed arbitrator to justify their criminal betrayal.

A court ruling earlier this year that the legislation used by the Harper government was unconstitutional did not overturn a single one of the concessions made by CUPW. Yet Palecek and CUPW are claiming that the judgment shows that the courts can be counted upon to uphold workers' rights and that there is no threat of the government intervening to once again criminalize worker job-action.

CUPW's determination to suppress a genuine challenge to Canada Post and the ruling class agenda of concessions, public service cuts, and privatization is exemplified by its fulsome praise for the Liberal government of Justin Trudeau and its ongoing review of Canada Post. In a recent bulletin to members, CUPW enthused, "Through the Review of Canada Post, the government is welcoming ideas of service expansion. We

launched our campaign for postal banking in 2013. Now we have an opportunity to talk to the public and push hard to make postal banking a reality.”

This is nothing but a deliberate effort to deceive postal workers. The Liberal government has already made clear that its review will only consider proposals based on running Canada Post as a profitable concern. It is on this basis that CUPW premises its diversionary campaign for postal banking.

It is revealing that CUPW has chosen to focus considerable attention during the contract talks on Canada Post’s proposal to do away with Appendix T. This is a committee made up of representatives from management and CUPW supposedly tasked with overseeing projects to promote “innovation” and “service expansion.” Innovation is nothing but a codeword for the destruction of workers’ rights and jobs, while the expansion of services in some areas has been bound up with worsening conditions for postal workers.

A recent blog post by Palecek welcomed the day-and-a-half given to CUPW to present its ideas to the taskforce which will make recommendations to the Liberals Canada Post review.

The Liberals’ posed during last year’s federal election campaign as opponents of the Tory-backed plan to end home delivery and defenders of postal services. But predictably they are now singing a very different tune. Asked about maintaining home delivery, Public Services and Procurement Minister Judy Foote made no secret of the fact that this would be connected to service and job cuts, stating, “There’s a potential here for restoring home mail delivery. The question is, is it restored on a two-day a week, three-day a week, five-day a week—we need to hear from Canadians what they need.”

None of this should come as any surprise to postal workers, given that the Liberals, as the Canadian bourgeoisie’s preferred party of government, have been their vicious enemy for decades. In 1978, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, the current PM’s father, threatened to fire the entire workforce *en masse* when postal workers defied a strike breaking-law, ordered the union’s offices raided, and subsequently had CUPW President Jean-Claude Parrot imprisoned.

Under the Liberal governments of Jean Chretien and Paul Martin from the mid-1990s until 2006, privatization of the postal service was not halted, as CUPW often claims. Instead, the creeping privatization through the franchising process persisted. At the same time, the Liberals implemented unprecedented social spending cuts,

slashing jobless benefits and public services.

CUPW, like the union bureaucracy as a whole, has been transformed over this period into an appendage of management, which is fully complicit in the attacks on its own members.

Palecek symbolizes this transformation. From leading the trade union work of Fightback, a self-proclaimed “Marxist” organization, he seamlessly transitioned over the course of less than two years into a leading trade union bureaucrat. Palecek was among the over 100 union officials who met behind closed doors with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau less than a week after he took office to pledge their readiness to collaborate in implementing the new government’s agenda. Predictably enough, Fightback has said nothing about their former leader’s evolution.

To prevent further concessions, postal workers must urgently draw the lessons of past confrontations with Canada Post and their political masters, take their struggle out of the hands of the CUPW apparatus, and oppose its attempts to limit any job action to a reactionary and futile effort to pressure the Liberal government to intervene on postal workers’ behalf with Canada Post management.

A struggle to defend the jobs and conditions of postal workers can only be successful if independent rank-and-file committees are formed on the basis of an explicit rejection of the principle that Canada Post, and public services more generally, must be run as profitable concerns. This requires mounting a challenge to the capitalist profit system, which is producing rapidly deteriorating living conditions for the entire working class. On the basis of a socialist program, postal workers should seek to make their struggle the spearhead of an offensive aimed at mobilizing the entire working in defence of health care, education, and all public services and developing the fight for a workers’ government capable of organizing society on the basis of human need rather than private profit.



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