

Despite Canada Post's provocations, postal union opposes strike action

Laurent Lafrance, Roger Jordan
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At the request of a government-appointed special mediator, the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) suspended for at least 24 hours its plans to begin Monday a rotating, regional overtime ban.

This is just the latest episode in the union's refusal to mobilize resistance to the massive concessions demanded by the federal government-owned Canada Post. The rollbacks include the elimination of a defined pension benefit plan for new hires, a four-year pay freeze for temporary workers, major cuts to medical and other benefits, and the slashing of more than 1,000 postal clerk positions.

CUPW's climb down came after it was reluctantly forced last Thursday to issue a 72-hour notice of impending job action. Had it not issued the notice, the 50,000 CUPW members would have lost their legal right to strike. Under Canada's reactionary labour code, a membership strike mandate is deemed to have expired if it is not exercised within 60 days.

In the absence of a legal strike mandate, Canada Post management would have a free hand to unilaterally dictate workers' terms of employment until a new collective agreement is negotiated.

Even so, CUPW made sure that its "job action" would have as little impact as possible on Canada Post's operations. It announced it had no plans to organize a strike or even rotating walkouts and that the postal workers would be merely asked on a rotating, provincial or regional basis to refuse overtime.

CUPW President Mike Palecek, a former leader of the pseudo-left Fightback group, who postures as a militant and leftist, even offered to renounce this toothless action if Canada Post agreed to an extension of the legal strike mandate. Predictably, management rejected the union's offer out of hand.

Palecek has acknowledged, even boasted, that the union's overtime ban will have a negligible impact on

Canada Post's operations. "Our action," he declared, "will cause little to no disruption for the public. We'll still be delivering mail every day."

Such a bankrupt strategy is in line with the position CUPW has held throughout the entire nine-month labour dispute. Even though management adopted a confrontational approach from the outset and made clear it would not back down on its key concession demands, CUPW has vehemently opposed strike action, let alone making the postal workers' struggle the spearhead of a working class counteroffensive in defence of public services and workers' rights. Instead, the union has lauded the Trudeau government's review of Canada Post operations—which is predicated on the post office operating as a profit-making enterprise—and repeatedly vowed it will not "disrupt" the Liberals' review by mounting a strike.

If Palecek and the CUPW leadership ultimately did issue a notice of job action it was above all out of fear that management's refusal to abide by parts of the expired collective agreement would enflame the rank-and-file, with the real danger they might break free of the union's control.

Management has nonetheless reiterated its threat to suspend workers' vacation, maternity and adoption leave and insurance and other benefits, possibly as early as today.

Instead of rallying the rest of the working class to join the postal workers in a struggle in defence of jobs, wages and public services, CUPW has done everything to demobilize and isolate postal workers and promoted fatal illusions in the purportedly "progressive" Liberal government.

Under Palecek's leadership CUPW played a major role in the unions' pro-Liberal "Anybody but Harper" campaign, which paved the way for the return to power of the Liberals, long the Canadian elite's preferred party of

government, in last October's election. CUPW has continued to promote the new government as an ally of working people. Earlier this month, CUPW held demonstrations in Montreal and Toronto at which union leaders lauded Trudeau and his Liberals as defenders of public services and pensions in supposed contrast to the "Harper-appointed" bosses of Canada Post and urged the government to directly intervene in the contract dispute.

Showing its pro-capitalist nature, CUPW fully endorses the Liberal-led "postal review" which has the explicit aim of making postal services more "competitive" and profitable. Accepting the review's reactionary framework, Palecek is pushing for the introduction of postal banking to supposedly offset the decline in letter volumes.

CUPW and the Canadian Labour Congress are completely silent on the fact that in the very first major labour conflict involving the new government, Trudeau and his Liberals have repeatedly sided with management. Last month they urged the union to accept binding arbitration, a request CUPW said it "politely" declined.

In mid-August, an arbitrator appointed by the Trudeau government sided entirely with Canada Post's proposal for a new contract with the almost 6,000 postmasters and assistants working in the country's rural post offices. The new contract imposes a defined-pension benefit plan for new hires—one of the key concessions Canada Post is demanding of CUPW members.

The encouragement of illusions in the Liberals by CUPW is even more criminal given the past experiences postal workers have had with this right-wing, big business party. In 1978 under Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, the current prime minister's father, the Liberal government threatened to fire postal workers en masse, and imprisoned CUPW President Jean-Claude Parrot, when they defied strike-breaking legislation.

Under the Chretien-Martin governments of the 1990s and early 2000s, which carried out the largest social spending cuts in the country's history, the Liberals once again illegalized a CUPW strike and oversaw the continued backdoor privatization of the postal service via franchising.

While it is urging Canada Post to abandon some of its most draconian demands so as to appease workers' anger, CUPW is more than willing to collaborate with management in imposing drastic concessions through "good-faith" negotiations as it has shown time and again for decades.

Palecek was elected CUPW president following the

blatant betrayal of the union leadership in 2011-12, when it enforced the Harper government's strikebreaking legislation, then negotiated a contract that imposed sweeping cuts that have enabled the company to pocket tens of millions in profits. But despite his leftist posturing and his false claim that he would regain what CUPW members lost in 2011-12, Palecek is pursuing the very same policy.

CUPW's refusal to call a national strike in 2011 and instead to adopt toothless rotating walkouts handed the initiative to Canada Post. It promptly locked out the workers and the Conservative government, then legislated them back to work. Palecek's token overtime ban and promotion of the Liberals will have similar disastrous results.

Postal workers determined to wage a genuine struggle against the attacks of management must act immediately to take control of their struggle out of the hands of the trade union bureaucracy. To resist Canada Post's concessions demands, workers must break politically and organizationally with CUPW and establish rank-and-file action committees to conduct their struggle. These committees must organize a national strike of all postal workers in line with the overwhelming mandate given by postal workers earlier this summer, while appealing for solidarity action by workers in other public services such as teachers, health care workers and social services employees, who all confront the same attacks from the government and corporate elite.

Above all, a new political perspective is required. The defence of the postal service, and all other essential public services, can only take place in a society where human need is placed above the profit drive of the ruling class. This necessitates a rejection of the capitalist profit system, which must be abolished and replaced by a workers government committed to a socialist program to reorganize society in the interests of the vast majority.



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