Canada’s pseudo-left Fightback covers up CUPW betrayal of postal workers

Laurent Lafrance
9 December 2016

While postal workers were voting this fall on a concessions-laden agreement recommended by the leadership of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers’ (CUPW), the pseudo-left Fightback group published a favorable interview with the union’s president Mike Palecek. Fightback presented the union’s sellout as a major victory and Palecek as an exemplary militant and workers’ leader.

Published on Fightback’s website in October, the interview article marked the first time since Palecek was elected CUPW president that Palecek and Fightback, the Canadian affiliate of the misnamed International Marxist Tendency (IMT), have publicly admitted their longstanding political ties. The article noted that before becoming CUPW president Mike Palecek was “a regular contributor to Fightback and (to its website) www.marxist.ca.” This is a gross understatement: Palecek was for years one of Fightback’s principal leaders and its chief spokesperson on labour issues.

The *World Socialist Web Site* previously warned that if Fightback was maintaining a radio silence about their former leader’s ascent within the union bureaucracy—it failed even to report his May 2015 election to the presidency of the 50,000 member CUPW—it was because it hoped they could work together in the future.

This analysis has now been proven in spades.

Palecek played a leading role in the unions’ “Anybody but Harper” campaign, which promoted the Liberals, the Canadian bourgeoisie’s traditional party of government, as a “progressive” alternative, paving the way for their return to power, after a decade of Conservative rule, in the October 2015 federal election.

This summer Palecek led the CUPW bureaucracy in vehemently opposing any job action by postal workers on the grounds that nothing should be allowed to “disrupt” the work of a Liberal government task force into the future of the post office; then signed on to a concessions contract.

Fightback is more than willing to endorse these betrayals and to boost Palecek, proudly proclaiming him a “friend” and “comrade.”

Fightback begins the interview by lauding Palecek for “beating back” the attempt of management to implement two-tiered pensions and “resisting the pressure to bend to binding arbitration.” By repeating Palecek’s lies that the CUPW leadership successfully resisted Canada Post’s draconian demands, Fightback exposes its key political role: serving as a left cover for the pro-capitalist unions and New Democratic Party and, above all, preventing the independent political mobilization of working class.

Fightback claims Palecek and the CUPW leadership “adopted militant language that put the boss on the back foot and mobilized and enthused the rank-and-file.”

In reality, the union maneuvered, ultimately successfully, to contain and suppress the rank-and-file, using “militant” rhetoric to cover up its virulent opposition to any and all job action.

As the Crown Corporation aggressively pushed for savage rollbacks, CUPW opposed workers’ taking job action, offered to work with big business to make Canada Post better serve their needs, and strove to prevent a confrontation with the Trudeau government.

CUPW isolated postal workers from the rest of the working class. It refused to make the defense of postal services and post workers’ jobs and pensions the spearhead of a broader struggle in defence of all public services and against all concessions.

Instead, it mounted a “Save Canada Post” campaign predicated on acceptance of the reactionary social principle that the ruling elite is systematically employing to dismantle all public services—that Canada Post must be run as a profit-making enterprise.

Among the most significant features of Fightback’s interview is its complete silence on the role that the Liberal government played in the dispute—a government Palecek helped elect and whose postal task force he promoted. Indeed, Palecek’s principal argument against job action was that nothing should be allowed to interfere with, or detract from, the task force’s work.

Initially the Liberals claimed they wanted to stay out of the negotiations between CUPW and Canada Post management. But ultimately—under conditions where the union, faced with the expiry of its legal strike mandate, had been forced to threaten a toothless overtime ban, and Canada Post management, which was itching for a confrontation, indicated it would respond aggressively—the government played the pivotal role. Working behind the scenes, it prevailed on the two parties to set aside the four-year deal they had been discussing and accept a two-year, and for all intents and purposes interim, agreement.

The Liberals’ transparent aim in doing this was to better politically prepare Canada Post’s offensive against postal services and workers. Not least through the CUPW-promoted postal task force.

Just days after union and management representatives affixed their signatures to the tentative contract midwifed by the

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government, the task force submitted its report. As was entirely predictable given its composition and mandate, the task force dismissed CUPW's proposals, while endorsing Canada Post's demands for major restructuring. Insisting that the post office faces major "financial challenges," the task force proposed a whole slew of anti-worker cost-cutting measures including: the elimination of five-day a week mail delivery, privatization of 800 additional postal stations, consolidation of postal-sorting plants and pension cuts.

The task force report has set the tone and effectively the parameters for the "second phase" of the Liberals' review, which consists of public hearings across Canada and a House of Commons' committee report to be issued this month. In the face of this, Palecek and the CUPW leadership have been reduced to bleating that their proposals are being ignored.

Meanwhile, in October the Liberals presented to parliament a bill to establish a framework through which companies under federal jurisdiction, including Crown Corporations, can replace defined-benefit pension plans with hybrid schemes that shift much of the financial risk from employers to their workers.

While hailing the agreement CUPW concluded with Canada Post as a victory for postal workers, Fightback and Palecek say very little about the agreement's contents in their interview. And with good reason, since it includes significant rollbacks.

These include wage increases that fail to keep pace with inflation—i.e., real wage cuts—for both urban and rural units. CUPW has also agreed to delivery "flexibility" during weekends, morning and evenings, with the new work-stream to be performed by temporary employees.

As for the inequity between urban and rural letter carriers' pay, an injustice that the union insisted had to be resolved in the 2016 negotiations, it will now be the subject of separate talks whose outcome will not be known until 2018.

Unlike Fightback, postal workers themselves are highly critical of the agreement negotiated by Palecek and the CUPW bureaucracy. According to preliminary figures released by the union, just 63 percent of urban post workers and 55 of rural postal workers voted to ratify the two-year agreement.

During the interview, Fightback avoids mentioning, let alone criticizing, Palecek's leading role in the "Anybody but Harper" campaign. This silence is all the more criminal now that the Liberal Party has exposed itself to a new generation as the mere successors of the Harper Conservatives, committed to implementing, in somewhat different packaging, the same ruling-class agenda of austerity, attacks on democratic rights and imperialist war. And it is doing so with the steadfast support of the Canadian Labour Congress and the rest of the union bureaucracy.

Ironically, it is Palecek who mentions the Liberals, although not to expose their role in reaching the interim contract settlement. When the interviewer commends CUPW for rejecting "employer proposed binding arbitration," Palecek corrects him, noting that it was actually the Liberal government, not Canada Post, which floated the idea in early July. The Fightback interviewer politely moves on without further comment.

At one point, Fightback claims that there is "confusion" among union leaders as to how to defeat austerity and asks its "comrade" Palecek if it is not the time for the labour movement to advance a "clearly socialist platform." Palecek, employing the double-talk of a union bureaucrat on the make, replies vaguely about breaking "the control of the free market economy and the need for "a more democratically controlled economy" and couples this with CUPW's call for developing new revenue streams, like postal banking, for Canada Post—a proposal aimed at ensuring the Crown Corporation's viability as a profit-making enterprise.

This bankrupt and duplicitous answer doesn't stop Fightback from encouraging Palecek to "champion the same socialist perspective he forthrightly defended for over a decade in the pages of Fightback."

The real content of Fightback's "socialism" is glaringly revealed in the very next passage, when it encourages him and other union bureaucrats to adopt the "radical language" of such figures as "Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders."

Corbyn has completely capitulated to the right-wing of the Labour Party, supporting the need for fiscal restraint (i.e., capitalist austerity) and allowing for "free votes" on Britain joining the war in Syria and modernizing its nuclear-weapons program.

Sanders' political role was to channel social anger in the American working class right behind the Democratic Party. Today, he is kneeling before Donald Trump, pledging to work with his administration in implementing economic nationalist policies that pit workers against each other and pave the way for imperialist war.

Fightback's hailing of Palecek is in line with the group's reactionary perspective that the unions and their political allies in the New Democratic Party can be pressured to advance what they call a "socialist" strategy, i.e., a limited, pro-capitalist reformism. It exemplifies that under conditions of deepening capitalist crisis and a shift to the right by the Liberal government with the imposition of attacks on workers at home and the waging of war abroad, Fightback will eagerly assist the unions and social democrats in politically suppressing the working class and imposing concessions, job cuts and worse.

Th e author also recommends:

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