

“Whatever happens to us is going to happen to everybody else”

Toronto airport strikers speak out

Our reporters
4 September 2017

Baggage handlers and other ground crew have been on strike at Toronto’s Pearson International Airport for over a month in a fight against Swissport, one of the world’s largest airline service-providers.

The 700 workers are resisting Swissport’s attempt to further reduce their already low wages and gut working conditions. Although Swissport, with the support of the government-owned Greater Toronto Airports Authority (GTAA) and the tacit backing of the federal Liberal government, is seeking to break the strike using scabs (replacement workers), the Teamsters leadership is doing nothing to mobilize the working class in defence of the Swissport workers. *World Socialist Web Site* reporters visited picket lines at Pearson Airport last week and spoke with strikers.

David started with the airport in 2003 in central de-icing and has seen conditions deteriorate with changes in ownership over the years. A baggage handler for more than three years at Swissport, David told the WSW, “They want to take away our wages and take away our benefits—they want to take all that down and they want to take away our vacations. They wanted to give everybody rotating shifts, to give everyone just 96 hours to say, ‘OK, we’re going to change your hours.’”

David explained how the decision to reject the latest contract offer in an August 23 vote and continue the strike was wholly on the workers’ own initiative. “In the latest vote, the union didn’t say anything about the new contract offer. They made us make the choice. They read it out and then said, ‘You guys make a choice about what you want to do.’”

David also addressed the issue of Swissport’s use of untrained strike-breakers. “They got agency workers and they’re not getting proper training,” said David. “What are they going to do, wait until somebody gets killed? Things aren’t being done the way they were supposed to be done when I got hired. Back then they had a process: you got a yellow pass and had to get escorted around. You weren’t allowed to leave the building unless you had an escort with

you. Now they’re handing these yellow passes out like they’re stickers. Safety is an issue in there. As far as I’m concerned, somebody’s going to get hurt.”

Gwen, who works in baggage handling, also raised safety and security concerns. “As far as the strike goes, I think we’ve had a lot of support from the other unions within the airport. One of the biggest issues we have is that GTAA has given them allowance to bring in all kinds of temporary workers and work as scab labor,” Gwen explained. “Even though there were assurances that they weren’t going to use replacement workers before we voted for the strike, they were already allowing them because Swissport was hiring them as summer help. But in all the years I’ve worked here, they’ve never had temporary agency workers for summer help. Never. One of the biggest issues I think with the temporary workers is the safety issue and it’s also a security issue.”

Bob has been working in the airport as a baggage handler and de-icer for over 27 years. He told the WSW how workers have sought to challenge Swissport’s employment of untrained strikebreakers. “We’ve brought this before the Labor Board. Our argument is that they had hired scab labor even before the strike. Our next date is sometime in September, so we’ll see what happens then. We are out here for the long haul—whatever it takes. But we’d like to get back to the bargaining table.”

He also pointed out that the media was ignoring the conflict. “A lot of the news isn’t really getting out there,” he said. “You don’t hear much about bag delays on the news, but there’s a lot of that going on. There’s been incidents. We’ve given videotapes and pictures to the media, but you don’t really see it on the news. The other unions are all out there in solidarity, but as for walking out and doing stuff with us, nobody’s really taken the next step.”

Bob detailed the growing pressure on workers at the airport. “A lot of the issues here are around looking for respect, hours of work, and stuff like that. It’s just flight to flight to flight. And that’s the whole issue. They were already short manpower, so it’s just crazy right now,”

he added.

“Depending on the day, we do narrow body and wide body—there’s different types of aircraft. Narrow body you’re in the belly of an aircraft, so you’re hunched over and you’re throwing maybe an average of 160, 180 bags a flight. You could do four or five of those in a day; and in all weather conditions—rain, snow.

“It takes a toll on the body. But where else are you going to go? You try to work until you’re 65, but a lot of workers get injured. So you work until a certain point and then you’re just out the door, right?” added Bob.

Workers receive low pay for this back-breaking labour. “Minimum wage payment they’re starting at right now is \$11.75,” he went on. “And senior employees like myself, they just want to give us a lump sum 2% payout which works out to about \$400. Three years from now my wage would still be identical.”

One of his co-workers added, “They’re talking about topping wages at \$17.25 an hour. Who can live off that? I know we can’t, and most of us aren’t even making near that much.” Bob agreed, noting that many workers would lose their benefits under a company plan to impose qualifying hours that would prevent part-timers from obtaining benefits.

Glen, a ground handler and Teamsters shop steward, was critical of the unions’ leadership and support of the strike. “I met with a few other unions yesterday when I went up to the meeting and I was very disappointed,” he told us. “Personally I feel like we’re not getting enough support. The unions who are working inside the airport at the moment like IAM, USW, Unifor are not really helping us. Their negotiations are coming up. Unifor is negotiating at the moment. They’re going to be in the same shoes as we are out here and we’ll be there to support them.”

Glenn started with Handlex 12 years ago, which was bought out by ServisAir which was subsequently taken over by Swissport. He noted that the company is pushing for full control over work scheduling. They can give me 72 hours’ notice and say you’re going to do night shift next week then dayshift the next week,” Glenn explained. “I don’t want that. We all have family life outside Swissport.”

He noted that the top wage was \$22 an hour, even for workers who have been employed for over 25 years. “I think they want to get rid of all the people that are earning the top wages and get the new guys in and train them,” he went on. “I had to wait 2 ½ months for my yellow pass and look at what these scabs have: yellow passes! The GTAA has given them yellow passes straightaway, after two days’ training. They throw them out on the ramp, they go out there and tell them to wing walk and to me it’s a major safety violation that the Labor Board should be really looking into. GTAA

and Swissport are letting them get away with this. There’re so many safety violations in the airport at the moment even as I speak. Nobody seems to be concerned about it.”

Steve, who started working at Swissport as a baggage handler in February, is making just \$11.60 an hour. “We’re getting minimum wage but the work we’re doing is not minimum wage work,” said Steve. “It’s physically hard and the scheduling isn’t easy to plan around. They want to do six days ‘On’ and three days ‘Off,’ which practically means that I can’t have any other type of life. I can’t schedule anything else around my work because I don’t know when my days off are going to be.”

Pointing to a line-up of cars at the gate, Steve explained that workers are supportive of the strike. “Most of the people we’re stopping work here. At first they saw us as an annoyance, but then they realized what happened to us could happen to them. Then they started being more sympathetic and supporting us more,” he said. “There’s another company Menzies, who are baggage handlers at Pearson, and their contract is coming up I believe next year in March and there’s a lot of companies whose contracts are coming up. So now we have four temp agencies just waiting here for a company to go on strike.

“We’re just trying to fight for everyone now: we’re kind of the tip of the spear. Whatever happens to us is going to happen to everybody else behind us.”

Lad, a baggage handler, said other sections of workers are under threat. “Another thing Swissport wants is huge givebacks from the cabin crew,” Lad said. “They want to cut \$3 per hour from their wage. These are our co-workers who work just as hard as anyone else in the company, usually harder. Currently they get a bonus for completing a thorough clean, which is incredibly difficult and hard on the body, but Swissport wants to axe that too.

“Another thing is that management often makes our jobs even harder. A lot of times we’ll be asked to complete a task, but not given the supplies, or the wrong equipment.”



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