

Three thousand Canadian railway workers strike against long hours and speed-up

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Three thousand Canadian Pacific (CP) Railway conductors and train drivers launched strike action at 10 PM EDT Tuesday night, crippling freight shipments across the country. The railway workers are fighting against onerous working conditions, including extremely long hours and irregular scheduling, that threaten public safety and are ruining workers' family lives.

The strike pits the railway workers, who have been without a contract since December, not only against CP Rail, one of North America's largest and most profitable railways, but also against the federal Liberal government, which last month used a pro-employer provision of the Canada Labour Code to temporarily suspend the workers' legal right-to-strike.

With the conductors and train drivers, as well as 360 signal workers who belong to a different union, poised to walk off the job April 21, federal Labour Minister Patricia Hajdu ordered the workers to vote on management's concession-laden "final" contract offers.

The proposed three-year contract for the train operators contained miserly, below-inflation pay increases of 2 percent per year and a \$1,000 payoff to every worker in exchange for their dropping numerous grievances filed against the company over its flagrant violations of safety standards and other contractual obligations and its illegal firings of workers.

Throughout the negotiations management has arrogantly refused to address workers' complaints over long working hours and fatigue. Dismissing the workers' demands, CP Rail CEO Keith Creel bluntly declared last month, "We cannot make and will not make a bad short-term deal that jeopardizes our ability to protect the long-term interest and strength of this company."

Last year, his first as the head of CP Rail, Creely made in excess of \$20 million Canadian (US \$15.3 million) in pay and bonuses.

CP Rail's corporate investors are also making out like

bandits. Just two weeks before the current strike, the company's board announced a 15 percent increase in CP Rail's quarterly dividend to shareholders.

Teamsters Canada, which represents the strikers, is determined to sabotage the struggle and shut down the strike as quickly as possible. Even as the strike deadline approached, union officials voiced hope that an agreement would soon be reached and stressed negotiations would continue even if a strike had to be launched.

Underscoring the unions' eagerness to prevent an all-out struggle against CP Rail, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) announced, shortly before the 360 CP Rail signaling workers it represents were set to jointly initiate strike action with the train operators, that it had reached a tentative settlement with the railway.

Both unions participated in government-sponsored talks over the weekend with Hajdu in attendance, even though the big business Liberals made clear through last month's intervention that they stand firmly on the side of management.

Leading representatives of corporate Canada are urging the Liberal government to move quickly to pass legislation illegalizing the strike, as Stephen Harper's Conservatives did when the CP Rail train operators walked off the job in 2012, and threatened to do when they struck again in 2015.

Wade Sobkowich of the Western Grain Elevator Association claimed even a one-week strike would have "serious financial consequences" for grain exporters. Mining companies, auto parts suppliers, and oil companies, which likewise rely heavily on rail transport for moving their products, are also lining up to press the government to force an end to the strike.

Asked at the weekend whether the Liberals are considering back-to-work legislation, Hajdu refused to rule it out, merely stating that the government is focused

on “supporting” the bargaining process.

The attitude of the big business Liberals to the struggles of the working class has been exemplified in recent days by the non-stop attacks that Ontario Liberal Premier Kathleen Wynne has mounted on the social-democratic NDP for its claim to oppose strike-breaking laws. On Monday, Wynne vowed that her first action if she is re-elected premier in Ontario’s June 7 election will be to recall the legislature to pass legislation illegalizing a strike by 3,000 York University contract faculty and graduate assistants. She then went on to denounce the NDP for purportedly giving away the “back-to-work tool” and thereby the power to “say ‘no’ [to workers] at any point in the (bargaining) process.”

Wynne’s Liberals, who have repeatedly used emergency laws to illegalize job action and impose concessions, are the closest provincial ally of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his federal Liberal government.

Particularly since Hunter Harrison was installed as CEO in 2012, CP Rail has been notorious for its ruthless cost-cutting at the expense of workers’ jobs, safety and well-being.

Variable-scheduling means that workers have sometimes been awake for 18 hours or more when driving a train of 100 or even 200 freight-cars. “You’re fatigued,” a CP Rail engineer told CBC in 2016. “You’re done. Your brain is mush. You want to go to sleep. You’re fighting constantly with your body. Your body is telling you one thing, but you know that on the other hand, you’ve got to get that train home ... 150 miles of track.”

The situation became so critical in early 2016 that Transport Canada, the national railway regulator, issued a compliance order to CP Rail, warning that the long hours and lack of personnel in its British Columbia operations posed an immediate danger to rail safety.

To prevail in their struggle, CP rail workers must draw the lessons from their past struggles and those of workers around the world.

The Teamsters ordered workers to submit to Harper’s back-to-work legislation in 2012, even though defiance of the hard-right Harper Conservative government would have galvanized workers across the country. In the preceding year, the Harper government had used similar legislation against strikes by Canada Post workers and Air Canada employees.

Emboldened by the Teamsters’ submission, CP Rail intensified its cost-cutting, announcing soon after that it was eliminating 4,000 more jobs, more than 20 percent of

the company’s workforce.

Forced to call another CP Rail strike in 2015, the Teamsters capitulated in the face of the threat of back-to-work legislation just two days after the strike began, and agreed to have all outstanding issues determined by a government-appointed, pro-company arbitrator.

The latest CP Rail strike is part of a growing resurgence of the class struggle across North America and internationally. This has found expression in mass strikes by teachers for better pay and working conditions across the United States, strikes and protests by railway workers in France against attempts to privatize the state-run rail company, and powerful strikes by industrial workers and public sector employees in Germany.

It is to this global upsurge of the working class that the striking CP Rail workers must turn. Their struggle for shorter working hours, regular scheduling, decent pay increases, and improved workplace benefits will go nowhere if it remains under the control of the union bureaucracy.

If the strike is to be successful, rail workers must act now to form their own independent strike committees to take control of the strike from the Teamsters’ apparatus and make it the spearhead of a working-class counter-offensive in defence of jobs, occupational health and safety, public services and worker rights.

This is above all a political struggle. Any attempt to broaden the strike will be met with the full force of the capitalist state, with the Liberal government ready to step in and try to impose management’s demands. CP Rail workers and their supporters must therefore base their struggles on a socialist and internationalist program—the fight for a workers’ government which will radically reorganize social-economic life so as to make meeting the needs of working people, not lining the pockets of the rich and super-rich, the animating principle.



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