

Teamsters scuttle Canadian Pacific Rail strike, laud Trudeau

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The Canadian wing of the Teamsters union announced early Wednesday afternoon that it had reached a tentative contract settlement with Canadian Pacific (CP) Railway. At the same time, it ordered the more than 3,000 train operators who had walked out on strike less than 18 hours before to report to work as of 6 AM local time today.

The Teamsters have provided no details of the proposed four-year agreement, let alone given the striking train drivers and conductors the opportunity to study and vote on it prior to ordering them back to work.

CP Rail workers should have no doubt as to the significance of the union's quick scuttling of their third strike in the past six years against a company that has spearheaded the drive of North America's railways to boost profits by slashing jobs and gutting work rules.

The Teamsters have abandoned the strikers' key demands—just as surely as they did in 2012, when they ordered compliance with a Conservative government back-to-work law, and in 2015, when they agreed, under the threat of similar legislation, to have all outstanding issues decided by a Conservative government-appointed arbitrator.

CP Rail CEO Keith Creel is already gloating over the agreement, boasting it will bring “long-term stability” to the railway, which has extensive operations across Canada and much of the US. Last year, his first at the helm of CP rail, Creel pocketed more than \$20 million (US \$15 million) in pay and bonuses.

In announcing the strike's end, the Teamsters Canada Rail Conference (TCRC) lavished praise on Canada's Liberal government, Labour Minister Patty Hajdu, and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau for their supposed support for “collective bargaining.” A TCRC press release thanked Trudeau “for standing up for workers' right to negotiate.”

In fact, the Trudeau government intervened last month to block the train operators from challenging CP Rail.

Using the reactionary provisions of the Canada Labour Code, it suspended the train operators' right to strike, as well as that of 360 signal workers, represented by the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), pending government-supervised votes on CP Rail's “final” contract offers.

Both groups of workers subsequently repudiated, by majorities well in excess of 95 percent, CP Rail's derisory offers of 2 percent annual wage increases and no substantive changes to its brutal work regime. For years, train operators have complained of long and frequently varying shifts that leave them fatigued, imperiling rail safety.

Hours before the Tuesday strike deadline and in response to a growing clamor from big business for government intervention, Trudeau said his government would not allow a prolonged shutdown of CP Rail, i.e., it stood ready to criminalize the train drivers and conductors' job action just as Stephen Harper's Conservatives did in 2012 and threatened to do in 2015.

But the prime minister indicated that he preferred that the Teamsters partner with the railway to end the strike rather than the government having to use the bludgeon of a back-to-work law.

“Quite frankly,” said Trudeau, “we have companies that have gotten used to the fact that in certain industries, the government in the past was very quick to legislate against unions. We are not going to do that.”

Trudeau went on to claim that if the government had to legislate an end to the strike, “we will also look at legislation to deal with some of the issues that the unions are talking about, which are not just about money but are about rail safety for employees.”

Clearly, Trudeau was concerned that yet another state intervention robbing workers of their right to resist rapacious employer demands would heighten growing worker awareness that the system is rigged against them

and further undermine support for the pro-capitalist unions. The latter claim workers' interests can be reconciled with those of the capitalist investors that profit from their exploitation through the reputed "give and take" of collective bargaining.

But everywhere around the world, big business is systematically clawing back the social rights workers won through the mass and revolutionary struggles of the last century, while their political hirelings attack democratic rights, criminalize social opposition and stoke anti-immigrant prejudice and other forms of reaction.

The unions have systematically promoted the Trudeau government as a "progressive," worker-friendly regime, even as it has slashed tens of billions from health care, pressed forward with the privatization of public infrastructure and vowed to raise military spending by more than 70 percent by 2026.

While Trudeau was posing as a defender of "collective bargaining" in the rail dispute, his closest provincial ally, Ontario Liberal Premier Kathleen Wynne, was boasting about her readiness to use back-to-work laws to break strikes—something she has repeatedly done during her five-year tenure as premier of Canada's most populous province. Wynne has pledged that should her government be returned to power in next week's Ontario election, her first action will be to pass legislation criminalizing the three-month-old strike that 3,000 York University contract faculty and graduate assistants have mounted against meager wages and precarious employment.

Over the past four decades, federal and provincial governments of all stripes—Liberal, Conservative, Parti Quebecois, and NDP—have used emergency back-to-work laws to illegalize powerful workers' struggles. Last May, the Quebec Liberal government illegalized a strike by 175,000 construction workers and in November, the Ontario Liberal government passed legislation forcing an end to a strike by 8,000 college teachers.

The unions are themselves complicit in the state attack on workers' rights. They have organized no opposition to the anti-strike laws, although for decades they have served as a key weapon in the big business offensive against the working class. Instead, they have used state intervention as the pretext for ending strikes that they were compelled to call by pressure from below.

In a now familiar scenario, throughout the months of negotiations that preceded this week's brief strike, the Teamsters and IBEW remained studiously silent about the threat of a government back-to-work law.

The Teamsters have said that ratification of yesterday's

agreement will take weeks. By drawing out the ratification process, the TCRC bureaucrats hope to dampen worker militancy.

As for the IBEW, it struck a deal with CP Rail only minutes before the Tuesday evening strike deadline.

In Canada as around the world, after years in which the corporatist unions succeeded in suppressing worker opposition, 2018 has seen a spike in the class struggle. Workers are rebelling against decades of stagnant and declining wages, the dismantling of public services, and the criminalization of worker resistance.

In many of these struggles—including strikes by Iron Ore of Canada miners in Labrador City, auto parts workers in Windsor and Ajax, Ontario, and casino workers, also in Windsor—workers have come into direct conflict with the trade union apparatuses, voting down union-backed, concessionary tentative contracts.

As the scuttling of the CP rail strike has again demonstrated, this rebellion must be armed with a socialist-internationalist perspective. Workers must build new organizations of struggle, including rank-and-file factory committees, independent of and in opposition to the pro-capitalist trade unions, so as to mobilize workers and young people across Canada and internationally against austerity and war and organize defiance of the anti-strike laws. Above all, the working class must build its own party to prosecute the struggle for a workers' government and the socialist reorganization of society. Only then will the mighty means of production that the working class has built be mobilized to meet social needs, rather than to line the pockets of the tiny capitalist elite.



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