

Canada: Postal union launches rotating walkout campaign

Keith Jones
23 October 2018

Canada Post letter carriers, workers at postal sorting stations, mail truck drivers and postal clerks walked off the job for 24 hours in four Canadian cities Monday—Halifax, Nova Scotia; Windsor, Ontario; Edmonton, Alberta; and Victoria, British Columbia.

The leadership of the 50,000-member Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) says it will call similar city-wide or regional one-day walkouts until a tentative contract settlement is reached with Canada Post, a government-owned, for-profit enterprise.

Postal workers have experienced a huge erosion in their living standards and working conditions over the past quarter-century as Canada Post, egged on by Liberal and Conservative governments, privatized much of its retail operations, eliminated door-to-door delivery for many households, slashed letter-carrier routes and imposed speed-up. In recent years, under the impact of technological change, Canada Post has prioritized its parcel delivery operations, forcing workers to work long and irregular hours, delivering heavy packages.

“Management’s productivity demands have increased significantly due to the arrival of online shopping,” Betty, a postal worker at the Edmonton sorting facility, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “But Canada Post had not increased the number of staff nor the shop floor sorting space to accommodate all the extra parcels.”

“The working environment is very dusty and is difficult to breath,” another Edmonton worker, Manny, said. “This speed-up has resulted in an unsafe working environment.” His coworker Linda added, “The conditions are really dangerous in this plant during rush hour because it is a really small space and all we do is lift heavy parcels, some of them 50 pounds.”

A major rollback in the conditions of postal workers took place after the CUPW bowed to the Harper Conservative government’s 2011 strike-breaking legislation and agreed to a sellout deal, which slashed pensions and imposed two-tier wages.

CUPW’s rotating strike campaign is a continuation of the ruinous course for workers the union has pursued for years, but especially since 2011. It is aimed at avoiding a confrontation with the government and the imposition of an anti-strike law by restricting, if not outright suppressing, any serious job action. The action by the union separates the struggle against the further privatization of the post office from a broader struggle to defend public services, and is based on acceptance of the big business-government diktat that Canada Post must be run as a for-profit enterprise.

Initiated weeks after postal workers gained the legal right to strike under the country’s anti-worker labour laws, the rotating city and regional walkouts are deliberately designed to be as ineffectual as possible.

In giving Canada Post a five-day, instead of the legally-required 72-hour, strike notice, CUPW President Mike Palecek publicly declared as much. “Our aim,” said Palecek, “is not to disrupt the public. It’s not to disrupt the service that we provide, that we’ve been defending for years, so we’re trying to come up with ways to put some pressure on Canada Post without impacting the public.”

Palecek was catapulted in 2015 from a low-level position in the postal union bureaucracy to the head of CUPW due to his appeal to anger over the disastrous consequences of the previous leadership’s surrender before the Harper government. A former leader of the pseudo-left Fightback group, Palecek claimed he would revive the militant traditions of the CUPW of the 1960s and 1970s when it repeatedly defied anti-worker laws.

But, despite his occasional militant bluster, Palecek has pursued exactly the same course as his right-wing predecessors. He was a leader of the unions’ “Anything but Conservative” campaign, which helped elect a Liberal government under Justin Trudeau that has continued the Harper government’s policies of austerity and war. This includes implementing a 70 percent hike in military spending over the next decade, while cutting tens of billions from healthcare transfers to the provinces.

In the 2016 negotiations, the union refused to call any job action, for fear of coming into conflict with the Liberal government and, to use its words, so as not to “disrupt” the Liberal task force on Canada Post services. Ultimately, CUPW bowed to government pressure and agreed to a short-term agreement with Canada Post that included a real wage cut and other concessions, such as greater “flexibility” for Canada Post to impose weekend and evening work.

While Palecek and the union tried to paint this as a victory, workers voiced strong opposition. Just 63 percent of the general membership voted in favour of the agreement. Among the Rural and Suburban Mail Carriers unit the agreement secured just 55 percent support.

Predictably, the Liberal-appointed task force issued a report comprised of right-wing recommendations entirely in line with Canada Post’s demands for major structural changes that would lay the groundwork for a massive attack on postal workers. These included charging for home delivery, reducing by half the number

of delivery days or dramatically hiking the price of stamps.

Palecek has also continued CUPW's longstanding campaign for Canada Post to expand into postal banking and exploit other profit-making business opportunities. Not only is this a diversion—the big banks to which all the major parties are beholden are adamantly opposed, but it is the opposite of a campaign for a united offensive of the working class to defend all public services, and the jobs and wages of the workers who administer them, based on the principle that healthcare, education and other vital services should not be subordinated to capitalist profit.

To this point, the Liberal government has not brandished the threat of criminalizing postal workers' job actions as Liberal and Conservative governments have repeatedly done in the past. Trudeau, whose government enjoys unprecedentedly close relations with the Canadian Labour Congress, Unifor and other major unions, is counting on CUPW to keep postal workers on a tight leash, confining job action to anemic rotating strikes and preventing any broader challenge to the austerity agenda being pursued by big business and all its governments, from the Trudeau Liberals to Ontario's Doug Ford-led Conservative government and the new right-wing Coalition Avenir Quebec regime in Quebec.

Asked by *Fightback* magazine in a recent interview how he would respond to a government strikebreaking law, Palecek dodged the question, declaring "I couldn't speak to specifics of what we may do in that situation."

In a 2015 interview, Palecek tied any defiance to the readiness of "the rest of the labour movement ... to stand up to the government," thus making resistance to strike-breaking legislation contingent on the very trade unions that have systematically suppressed the class struggle for the past three decades. Far from opposing the attacks on workers, the unions have imposed concessions time and again by scuttling powerful strikes and social movements when they threatened to provoke a mass working class upsurge. This includes the 1983 Operation Solidarity strike in BC, the 1995–97 anti-Harris movement in Ontario and the 2012 Quebec student strike.

Like all sections of the working class, postal workers are under systematic attack. The ruling class is determined to make working people pay for the global capitalist crisis through the destruction of what remains of the social rights workers wrested from big business in the mass struggles of the last century.

If their struggle is not to be strangled by CUPW, workers must seize the leadership of it. They should form rank-and-file committees, independent of the union apparatus, to launch an all-out strike, one animated by the perspective of fighting to mobilize the industrial and independent political strength of the entire working class against austerity, in defence of public services and in defiance of the anti-worker laws.

A *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team visited CUPW picket lines in Windsor on Monday.

A leaflet distributed by CUPW Windsor pointed to the restructuring of postal operations in the city, leading to some routes averaging 11 hours to deliver. The latest restructure forces carriers with less than 20 years to work 11 a.m.–7 p.m. shifts.

Workers told the WSWS that they were under a gag order, imposed by CUPW, supposedly to prevent misinformation, but in reality to prevent workers from expressing their views on the

situation.

Despite this, a number of workers agreed to talk to the WSWS on condition of anonymity.

Among the issues cited were the overburdening of jobs and pay increases below the rate of inflation.

Workers were particularly angry over the existence of a two-tier pay system, introduced after the suppression of the 2011 strike, that imposes a \$6–7 per hour pay differential between new hires and senior workers, with a seven-year period needed to reach top pay.

"It's just trickle down," one worker told the WSWS. She explained that her son worked at the Fiat Chrysler Windsor minivan plant under a two-tier wage scale doing the same work as senior employees for less pay. "You are just getting by. There is no middle class."

WSWS reporters noted that American postal workers were currently opposing plans by the Trump administration for the privatization of postal operations, a big issue in Canada as well. "It's a common struggle," said a part-time Windsor letter carrier.

Another worker added, "When it happens in the States it comes here," referring to the spread of postal privatization.

The letter carrier complained that pickets had not been informed of the issues by CUPW. "We don't know what we are on strike for."

She explained the conditions that workers are forced to labour under. "It's hard work and I have been doing physical jobs all my life. It is harder than people think it is.

"There is snow and ice in the winter. There are dogs and cars that don't pay attention to us. Then there is just a lot of walking. We might walk 15 kilometers a day, 100 kilometers a week. I am able to do it now, but what will it be like in 10 years?"

The worker also explained that part-time workers did not get pensions like full time employees.

Asked about her view of the unions, the workers explained, "The unions are a business. Several years ago the Casino Windsor workers went on strike. They came back with a contract and the workers voted it down." It turned out that union and management negotiators had left town on vacation, because they were so confident it would be ratified. "I knew then the unions were collaborating with management."



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