

Canadian postal workers criticize ineffectual rotating walkouts

Our reporters
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Postal workers have been out in force on picket lines wherever the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) has authorized job action since launching a campaign of rotating city-wide and regional strikes against government-owned Canada Post on Oct. 22.

This includes postal workers in four cities in four provinces on Monday (Halifax, Nova Scotia; Windsor, Ontario; Winnipeg, Manitoba; and Victoria, BC); the 9,000 postal workers in the Toronto-area on Tuesday and Wednesday; and at various times since Wednesday evening, workers in Calgary and Red Deer, Alberta; Kelowna, BC; and Sherbrooke, Quebec.

The 50,000 letter carriers, mail sorters, postal clerks and sorting-plant workers are determined to put an end to years of deteriorating working conditions and declining real wages.

But the CUPW leadership is holding workers on a tight leash, with the aim of preventing a clash with the big business Liberal government.

Behind a torrent of “progressive” bluster, Justin Trudeau and his Liberals have pressed forward with the austerity and war agenda of the much-hated Harper Conservative government, including hiking military spending by 70 percent by 2026. But unlike their Conservative predecessors, the Liberals have touted the union bureaucracy as junior partners, leading the heads of the Canadian Labour Congress, Unifor, and other major unions to boast of unprecedented access to government ministers.

Many Toronto-area postal workers interviewed by the *World Socialist Web Site* during their two-day strike were critical of CUPW’s strategy of confining job action to short, city-wide or regional rotating walkouts.

“We voted for a strike,” a 20-year veteran Canada Post employee told the *WSWS* while picketing Toronto’s South Central sorting plant. “We did not

vote for a rotating strike. We want a general strike.

“Did you see what happened last time?” he continued in reference to 2011, when the CUPW called rotating walkouts, claiming that this would enable workers to pressure Canada Post, without provoking government intervention. Instead, the Harper Conservative government egged on Canada Post to impose a nationwide lockout, then used the nationwide interruption of mail delivery as a pretext to impose a draconian back-to-work law.

“They locked us out and we lost in arbitration and this is the same thing that’s going to happen. What’s the point of doing the same thing again?”

A second picketer, Judy said, “I hope there’s a complete strike. It’s more effective. We gave the power to the union for a whole strike, but they decided to have a rotating strike.”

Judy explained that Canada Post is once again seeking to impose a real wage cut on its workforce. “The inflation rate is like 2.8 percent and inflation is going higher, but they’re only giving us 1.5. Never mind benefits, we are just asking for the basics. But this is like a pay cut. We had zero percent in 2015 and then 1 percent.”

Workers repeatedly expressed their anger and frustration over the CUPW leadership’s failure to explain why it is limiting job action to ineffectual rotating walkouts.

“I don’t think it worked last time,” a retired worker who had participated in the 2011 strike and had joined the picket line at South Central to show his support,” told the *WSWS*. “You know,” he added, “the definition of insanity? Doing the same thing again and expecting a different result.”

A 25 year Canada Post employee, the retired worker continued, “Justin Trudeau wants to pretend to be

progressive and at the same time he wants to give us another regressive contract but appear to the public as a moderate. Having a full strike with everybody out is obviously going to call his hand.

“This is an ongoing issue with the unions, with guys like (Unifor President) Jerry Dias selling workers out.”

One of the country’s largest employers, Canada Post rivals private industry in running roughshod over worker rights.

Pickers raised numerous concerns: the imposition of two-tier wages, forced overtime, pension cuts, the large lower-paid temporary workforce, the list goes on and on.

A major issue is a surge in workplace injuries due to the huge increase in parcel deliveries as a result of the growth in online-shopping, and management’s incessant push to speed up service, while expanding delivery routes, and cutting jobs.

A woman worker with 20 years’ experience spoke of the struggles she had had to wage against benefit cuts. She said that Canada Post requires workers injured on the job to see company-approved doctors who systematically deny claims. Workers who are too injured to work are subjected to intimidation with the aim of forcing them to quit.

Big business is braying for government intervention to force an end to the strike, i.e. for strikebreaking legislation like that Liberal and Conservative governments have repeatedly used against postal workers over the last four decades.

The Trudeau government would have no qualms about criminalizing worker job action. But for the moment, it deems it more politically expedient to rely on the CUPW leadership to prevent workers’ anger erupting into an all-out strike and, should that prove impossible, to isolate any strike and quickly reach an agreement with management predicated on ensuring Canada Post’s profitability.

For its part, CUPW has made it abundantly clear that it wants to dissipate workers’ anger through a long and deliberately ineffectual campaign of rotating walkouts. Moreover, it has scrupulously avoided any mention of what it would do in the event of a government back-to-work law, signalling thereby that it would enforce such a law.

Most important of all, while CUPW President Mike Palecek employs militant rhetoric, he is utterly opposed

to making the postal workers’ fight the spearhead of a broader working class challenge to the dismantling of public services and workers’ social rights.

On Wednesday, Labour Minister Patty Hajdu appointed former Ontario Labour Relations Board Chairman and labour relations lawyer Morton Mitchnick as a special mediator and later that day Mitchnick began meeting with the union and Canada Post management. In announcing Mitchnick’s appointment, Hadju revealed that she he had met with both sides and pressed them to come to a quick agreement.

If their struggle is not to be strangled by the 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.



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