

As Canada Post steps up provocations, union silent on back-to-work law threat

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Canada Post has taken a series of provocative steps since last Tuesday, with the clear aim of providing Prime Minister Justin Trudeau with pretexts for making good on his threat to criminalize the campaign of rotating strikes that 50,000 letter carriers, mail sorters and other postal workers have been mounting since October 22.

On Tuesday, government-owned Canada Post announced that it was indefinitely suspending mail delivery-time guarantees. The next day it tabled a concessions-filled offer of a four-year contract. Citing the need to maximize profits during the annual Christmas mail rush, Canada Post management declared this offer “time limited”: if the union does not sign on to it by 11:59 p.m. today, Saturday, November 17, the offer will be withdrawn.

Yesterday, Canada Post effectively shut down a large part of its operations, when it announced that it was requesting all foreign postal services, including the US Postal Service, to temporarily hold all mail destined for Canada. It blamed the decision on a massive backlog of unsorted mail.

Postal workers must beware. While Canada Post and the Liberal government are conspiring to break their strike and impose still further rollbacks, the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) is maneuvering to shut their job action down.

It has said not a word about Trudeau’s November 8 declaration to parliament that “all options” are on the table if the union does not soon agree to terms with Canada Post, even though that threat was publicly reiterated by a Labour Department official this week and has no doubt been repeatedly restated by government representatives in private.

Canada Post’s “limited-time” offer: A sham and an insult

Equally significant is the CUPW’s positive response to Canada Post’s derisory contract offer.

While conceding that management’s offer does “not seriously address the major issues (facing postal workers) ... health and safety, equality and creating more full time jobs and less precarious work,” CUPW President Mike Palecek has

called it “a step in the right direction.”

In reality, Canada Post’s claims of \$650 million in “improvements” are a sham and an insult.

Canada Post’s “time-limited” contract offer would result in a further erosion of postal workers’ living standards. It provides for annual wage increases of just 2 percent per year, less than the current inflation rate, and meager signing bonuses of \$1,000 for full-time workers, \$500 for part-time workers, and just \$250 for temporary workers. A cost-of-living escalator clause would only kick in if inflation surpasses 8 percent over the last three years of the contract, i.e., after workers had already suffered at least a 2 percent further cut in their real wages.

Canada Post is claiming to have provided increased job security. But this is largely smoke and mirrors. Moreover, the new “guarantees” are contingent on CUPW accepting a new category of “flexible full-time employees,” who could be scheduled to work shifts ranging from 4 to 12 hours on any given day. Part-time workers could be forced to work as much as 10 hours a day. Canada Post is also demanding the right to further expand its use of temporary workers between November and January; and it wants the right to leave vacancies open for an unlimited period of time during which it could fill them with lower-paid temporary employees at will.

Under Canada Post’s “offer” the hugely important issue of health and safety would be shunted off to a new union-management committee for further study. While Canada Post says it will set aside \$10 million, or just \$2.5 million per year, to address workplace safety, none of this money can be spent without the approval of its appointees on the new committee.

This under conditions where there has been a dramatic increase in accidents and injuries, as a result of management’s relentless push for speed-up and the surge in Canada Post’s parcel deliveries. According to recently-published research, postal workers suffer disabling injuries at a rate more than five times the average in federally-regulated industries—making working for Canada Post a more dangerous occupation than mining or working on the docks.

Like its global rivals in the highly-competitive delivery industry, Canada Post is more than willing to sacrifice the well-being and even the lives of its workers in pursuit of higher corporate profits.

Liberals conspire with Canada Post

If Canada Post is acting so provocatively and aggressively, it is because it knows full well that it enjoys the backing of Justin Trudeau's Liberal government. Acting to script, a government source told Canadian Press Friday evening that government intervention to end the strike could come as early as Sunday, adding, in a reference to Trudeau's earlier threat, "all the options' does include legislating."

As in every other aspect of domestic and foreign policy, the government's stance reflects the interests of the most powerful sections of the corporate elite, which are unwilling to tolerate any encroachment on their multi-billion dollar profits and fear that the postal workers' struggle could serve as the catalyst for a broader mobilization of the working class against low wages, precarious employment, and rapidly deteriorating working conditions. These sentiments were voiced Tuesday in a letter to the government from eBay Canada, which demanded that the postal strike be illegalized prior to the Black Friday and Cyber Monday (November 23 and 26) shopping extravaganzas, when the online sales giant expects to cash in on billions of dollars in transactions.

From the very outset, CUPW has done everything in its power to dissipate the militancy of postal workers and prevent them from harming Canada Post's bottom line. Despite an overwhelming vote for strike action, the union delayed calling a strike for weeks, and then initiated rotating job action so, to use Palecek's words, as "not to disrupt the public."

Postal workers have heard this all before. Notwithstanding Palecek's use of "left" rhetoric, the course he is pursuing is identical to that of his right-wing predecessors. In 2011, the CUPW leadership told postal workers that launching rotating strikes instead of an all-out walkout would avert a clash with the Stephen Harper-led Conservative government. Instead, CUPW's spinelessness only emboldened the Tories. They encouraged Canada Post to impose a nationwide lockout, then used the cessation of mail service as the pretext to ram through legislation that criminalized postal workers' job actions, imposed a wage settlement worse than that offered by Canada Post, and ordered the arbitrator who would be named to determine the rest of the contract to tailor it to management's demands.

This time around, even as the prospect of back-to-work legislation has loomed ever larger, CUPW has maintained a deafening silence on the government's threats and on how postal workers should respond.

The reason for CUPW's silence is obvious. The union has no more intention today than it did in 2011 of defying the back-to-work-legislation, appealing to the entire working class for

support and fighting to make the postal strike the spearhead of a broader working class challenge to austerity, concessions and the state-employer assault on working people's democratic and social rights.

This is because Palecek and the CUPW apparatus are terrified of unleashing a working class movement that could escape their control and threaten the "competitive position" of Canadian capital, and because they are wedded politically to the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) and the rest of the union bureaucracy which are close allies of the pro-austerity, pro-war Trudeau Liberal government. Indeed, the leaders of the CLC, Unifor and other major unions boast of their unprecedented "access" to the current government, and have been its junior partners in working with the Trump administration to transform NAFTA into a more effective bloc for advancing the imperialist economic and geopolitical interests of the Wall and Bay Street oligarchs.

If postal workers are to prevail over Canada Post and its political masters in the Liberal government, they must seize the leadership of their strike from the CUPW apparatus, by forming rank-and-file action committees at every sorting centre, postal depot and post office. These committees should immediately call an unlimited nationwide strike and make preparations to defy Liberal government back-to-work legislation.

While the Liberals and Canada Post management will try to use the full force of the capitalist state to intimidate and terrorize postal workers, the strikers have still more powerful allies in the Canadian and international working class, who face similar conditions of mounting economic stress and deteriorating working conditions.

The action committees must therefore issue a special appeal for solidarity from public sector workers across Canada; postal and delivery workers in the US, who are engaged in their own battles to beat back concessions demands from UPS, US Postal Service, and Amazon; and working people around the world. Only through the broadest mobilization of the working class on the basis of a socialist program to fight for a workers' government can postal workers' just demands for decent-paying, safe, and secure jobs be realized.



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