

Canada Post and Trudeau government conspire to break postal strike

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Government-owned Canada Post demanded yesterday that its 50,000 letter carriers, mail sorters, mail-truck drivers, and postal clerks cease all job action and agree to have their terms of employment dictated by a government-appointed arbitrator, if two and a half months of additional mediation fail to produce a negotiated settlement.

Adding insult to injury, Canada Post presented its demand that postal workers renounce their rights to strike and bargain collectively as an offer of a Christmas “truce” or “cooling-off” period.

The Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) lost little time in rejecting Canada Post’s provocative proposal. Postal workers have bitter experience with Liberal and Conservative government back-to-work laws and contracts dictated by government-appointed arbitrators. The contract imposed on postal workers after the Harper Conservative government criminalized the 2011 campaign of rotating strikes slashed postal workers’ pensions, cut their real wages, and greatly expanded Canada Post’s multi-tier, low-wage workforce.

But while Canada Post mounts one provocation after another—last Wednesday it suspended mail-delivery guarantees and on Friday it informed international postal services it would no longer accept foreign letters and parcels—and the Liberal government signals it is readying legislation to illegalize postal workers’ four-week-long campaign of rotating walkouts, CUPW continues to straitjacket the postal workers’ struggle.

As in 2011, CUPW is refusing to call an all-out national strike; has isolated the postal workers’ struggle, although the issues they face—speed-up, technological change, the contracting-out of work, multi-tier wages and declining real wages—are those confronting workers across the public and private sectors; and remains all but totally silent on the looming threat of government strikebreaking legislation.

In announcing the union’s rejection of Canada Post’s phony “truce” offer, CUPW President Mike Palecek said, “We aren’t doing this to harm the public, but the proposal asks our members to go back to work at the

heaviest and most stressful time of year, under the same conditions that produce the highest injury rate in the federal sector.”

In fact, postal workers suffer disabling injuries at a rate more than five times the average in federally regulated industries, which include the railways, longshoring, and marine shipping. Letter carriers are especially vulnerable, because their bodies are bearing the burden of Canada Post’s push to cash in on a huge increase in parcel deliveries due to the expansion of online shopping. According to CUPW, letter carriers have suffered 30,000 injuries since 2014, meaning many have suffered multiple injuries.

Palecek, who earlier had appealed to the Liberal government to reappoint a mediator to assist with the contact talks, insisted that an “agreement can be reached, if only Canada Post would address the issues and stop looking for ways not to negotiate.”

This is in line with the union’s systematic efforts to downplay what is at stake in the postal workers’ struggle, and the incompatibility between postal workers’ demands for an end to low wages, precarious employment and hazardous working conditions and the drive of Canada Post, the Liberal government, and big business as a whole to enhance investor returns and the competitive position of Canadian capital under conditions of the greatest crisis of world capitalism since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Last week, CUPW rejected a “time-limited” Canada Post offer for a four-year contract. It included wage increases below the rate of inflation, maintained the post office’s multi-tier wage structure, would have created a new category of “flexible” full-time workers who could be forced to work shifts ranging from 4 to 12 hours on any given day, and shunted the issue of health and safety off to a committee.

Yet even as it accused the post office of failing to address postal workers’ key demands, Palecek and the CUPW leadership tried to prettify what was on offer, claiming that it was an advance and proof that the union’s rotating strike strategy is bringing results.

Postal workers should take such comments as a warning that the CUPW leadership is maneuvering to find a way to strike another concessionary deal with Canada Post.

Even more revealing is the union's attitude to the threat of a government back-to-work law.

From the outset, it has been obvious that Canada Post is relying, as it has for decades, on the threat of government intervention to further roll back postal workers' working conditions and squeeze still more profit from them. Over the last four decades, Liberal and Conservative governments have illegalized postal strikes a half-dozen times.

Yet till late last week, the CUPW leadership breathed not a word about the threat of government intervention, let alone advanced a strategy to mobilize postal workers and the working class against government strikebreaking. This continued even after Trudeau told parliament on Nov. 8 that "all options" would be on the table if CUPW didn't soon reach a settlement with Canada Post, and through most of last week as various Labour Departments officials reiterated Trudeau's threat.

Only on Sunday, as news reports suggested the government might be just hours away from unveiling back-to-work legislation did Palecek finally break his silence. "We have a government," said the CUPW president, "that says they believe in collective bargaining. We hope their patience would match those principles."

Since then, various other CUPW officials have broached the subject of government intervention, but always from the standpoint of appealing to Trudeau and the Liberals and never from that of exposing the government as the instrument of big business and appealing to the working class for support in confronting and defeating it.

Palecek, it need be recalled, played a major role in the Canadian Labour Congress-spearheaded Anybody But Conservative campaign, which promoted the Liberals as a "progressive" alternative to the Harper Conservatives. No matter that the Liberals were long the Canadian ruling elite's preferred party of government and had, when they had last held office under Chretien and Martin (1993-2006), carried out the greatest social spending cuts in Canadian history; ordered the Canadian military to join wars and regime-change operations in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Haiti; and broken the 1997 postal strike and accelerated the privatization of Canada Post's retail operations.

CUPW and the CLC have continued to promote the Liberals. CLC President Hassan Yussuff and Unifor head Jerry Dias boast about their access to a government that has cuts tens of billions from health care, ordered a 70 percent hike in military spending by 2026, and established an Infrastructure Bank to work with the likes of BlackRock and McKinsey to privatize basic infrastructure.

On Monday, shortly after CUPW had rejected Canada Post's demand that it renounce any and all job action, Labour Minister Patty Hadju welcomed the willingness of both sides to continue negotiating. "They are not open to voluntary arbitration," added Hadju, "so we're reviewing the evidence right now, and we'll have more to say in the days to come."

The Labour Minister's comments suggest that the government still hopes that with the assistance of the CLC it can prod CUPW into accepting a concessions contract without having to use the bludgeon of legislation.

But big business is becoming increasingly impatient. It is anxious for the strike to be ended because it wants to maximize profits from the annual Christmas sale rush, but also because it fears a resurgence of class struggle. On Sunday, the Retail Council of Canada joined eBay in demanding the government immediately illegalize the postal workers' struggle.

CUPW's silence on the threat of back-to-work legislation is nothing new. Time and again, unions have used this stratagem to politically disarm workers; so that when workers' struggles bring them into a head-on clash with the political representatives of big business they can proclaim that the workers are isolated and that there is no alternative to bowing before the government.

In fact, the potential allies of postal workers are vast. They include workers across Canada and internationally who all face the same big business-state assault on their social and democratic rights.

But if this power is to be mobilized, postal workers must seize the leadership of their struggle 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, make preparations to defy Liberal government back-to-work legislation, and seek to make the postal strike the spearhead of a broader working-class challenge to austerity, contract concessions and the criminalization of workers' struggles.



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