

Over 3,000 Canadian National Railway workers strike across Canada

Roger Jordan
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Over 3,000 conductors, train operators, and yard workers at Canadian National Railway walked off the job yesterday after negotiators failed to reach an agreement by the 12 a.m. deadline. Workers, who have been without a contract since July, are protesting against dangerous working conditions and long shifts, which have led to high levels of fatigue.

Just three days before the strike, CN Rail management unveiled a further onslaught on the workforce with 1,600 job cuts, which will fall primarily on white collar workers. The layoffs will exacerbate the staffing crisis at the highly profitable railway, where workers are regularly sent on 42-hour round trips with no more than two hours' notice.

Striking workers who spoke to *World Socialist Web Site* reporters in Windsor also explained that increased company surveillance to boost productivity is a major concern. CN management has ordered rail workers to use tablets instead of rulebooks. The electronic devices have a constant 4G connection, allowing management to monitor a worker's every move. They are also being used to eliminate the jobs of workers who used to reroute freight cars.

Summing up the working conditions, Paul, a striking worker, told the WSW, "They want to add more work and get more hours from us without increasing our pay. The phrase is: 'Anytime is train time,' and that means you could go to bed at 10 p.m. after working all day and get a phone call in the middle of the night saying you have to come in. Some guys are up for 22 hours."

CN Rail management is making additional provocative demands, including that a lifetime cap be imposed on prescription medication for employees. This would effectively prevent CN workers and their families from being treated for a number of illnesses.

Management also wants to consolidate the practice of trains being operated by a single driver, which workers have strongly criticized due to the safety risk.

Similar attacks are occurring internationally. In the United States, an AP report revealed last month that the major railroad operators are pushing to eliminate two-person crews in the next round of bargaining. In France, Germany and

Britain, railway workers have struck repeatedly over recent years to protest deteriorating working conditions and safety concerns, including the introduction of driver-only-operated trains in the UK.

The CN strike takes place as British rail workers are threatening 27 days of strikes next month and French railway workers are expected to join public transport, airport, postal and other public workers in a general strike next month to oppose the Macron government's attack on pensions.

Canada's federal Liberal government sought until the last moment to prevent the CN strike. Transport Minister Mark Garneau and Labour Minister Patty Hajdu met with both sides Monday. On Tuesday, Hajdu issued a statement urging the swift conclusion of a deal.

Under conditions in which provincial governments across the country are imposing savage austerity measures, the ruling elite is determined to further ratchet up the ruthless exploitation of rail workers, regardless of the safety costs. Already on day one of the strike, representatives of big oil and agricultural operations in western Canada demanded that the Liberals intervene with back-to-work legislation to shut down the strike and ensure the flow of barrels of oil and other commodities to market.

"We call on the Prime Minister to immediately call back Parliament to enact emergency back-to-work legislation for CN Rail," stated Alberta's Energy Minister, the United Conservative Sonya Savage. The House of Commons is only scheduled to return from its post-election break on December 5.

Savage's demand makes clear the reactionary character of the Liberals' post-election efforts to find "common ground" with hard-right provincial governments in Alberta and Saskatchewan in the name of "national unity." In reality, the cooperation Trudeau is seeking with Alberta Premier Jason Kenney and Saskatchewan's Scott Moe is aimed at intensifying the onslaught on the working class across the country in the interests of the most predatory sections of big business.

Liberal governments have shown time and again their willingness to criminalize strikes to enforce big business' demands. However, recalling parliament early would pose political problems which they are hoping to avoid by relying on the Teamsters to shut down the strike on management's terms. Trudeau will be sworn in today as head of a Liberal minority government that is universally being portrayed by the corporate media, the New Democrats, and the unions as a "progressive" alternative to the Tories. This fraudulent image, which will be used to enforce right-wing policies of austerity and war, would take a battering if the Liberals' first action in power is to recall parliament to ban a strike.

The Teamsters union has repeatedly proven itself to be a reliable partner of Liberal and Conservative governments alike in shutting down strikes. In 2012, the union complied with back-to-work legislation imposed by the Harper Conservatives to criminalize a strike by over 3,000 train operators at Canadian Pacific, the country's second major rail company. Three years later, merely the threat of Labour Minister Kellie Leitch to outlaw the strike was enough for the Teamsters to call off a planned strike.

Canadian Pacific rail workers walked off the job in May 2018, but the Teamsters scuttled the strike after less than a day. Despite the fact that the Liberals had intervened a month earlier to temporarily suspend the workers' right to strike using a reactionary provision in the Canadian Labour Code, the Teamsters praised Trudeau after calling off the strike "for standing up for workers' right to negotiate."

The Teamsters' close collaboration with management and refusal to mount any challenge to government-imposed legislation has facilitated a decades-long assault by the employers on the jobs and working conditions of rail workers. In the mid 1980s, CN Rail employed over 100,000 workers. Now, it has just 22,000 across North America, including only 3,200 conductors, trainpersons, and yard workers in Canada.

The attacks on wages and worker safety, and increased workloads have led to devastating consequences across Canada's rail network. One report estimates that worker fatigue has played a role in 90 investigations conducted into rail accidents by the Transport Safety Board since 1992.

The most infamous rail accident in recent times occurred in July 2012 at Lac Megantic, Quebec, when an unmanned runaway train operated by a regional carrier, overseen by only a single employee and transporting a highly volatile oil cargo, careened into the town and incinerated 48 people. Subsequent investigations showed that the disaster was in large part due to reductions in government inspections and ever-more lax regulations.

The impact on the workforce of the never-ending series of attacks across the railroad sector was explained by striking

workers in discussion with WSWs reporters.

"This is my first strike in seven years," said Paul, who worked for Canadian Pacific before being laid off and transferring to CN in 2012. "In 2008-09 during the economic crisis the railroads cut lots of jobs. We want job security. I've been laid off more than half the time since I came over from CP seven years ago. We build the trains and switch the cars. This terminal in particular depends on the Chrysler plants and any downturn in the auto industry will hit us."

"It would be good to have job security," added Mitch, a younger worker, with five years at CN. "I got hired in here in 2014, got my on-the-job training, and then I was laid off for three years. I've got five years seniority but I've only had steady employment for two years."

"If I was the only breadwinner in the house it would have been a disaster. My wife works for the Windsor public schools and they could go out on strike any time because the district wants to lift the cap on class sizes. None of us have stable jobs. My wife knows someone who was a substitute teacher for eight years before getting hired full time."

Mitch also pointed to the skyrocketing levels of social inequality, which have driven an upsurge of working class struggle around the world over the past two years. "You're not able to plan for anything. We're always asking ourselves: 'Are we going to be able to buy a house? Can we have kids?'" While workers are struggling, 40 billionaires in the US have more wealth than the bottom 60 percent of the population. The inequality is just crazy."

The complicity of the Teamsters in attacking jobs, gutting safety and regulations, and attacking wages demonstrates that CN workers' demands for decent-paying, secure jobs cannot be obtained by appealing to the union bureaucracy to fight. Instead, striking CN Rail workers must take the conduct of their struggle into their own hands by forming action committees independently of and in opposition to the Teamsters. These committees must appeal for a broadening of the struggle to railway workers at CP Rail and in the United States, who all confront the same terrible working conditions. They should also call for solidarity action by autoworkers, teachers, and other sections of the working class whose rights and working conditions are coming under daily attack.



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