As corporate Canada calls for strike-breaking legislation

CN Rail workers continue fight against onerous working conditions

Carl Bronski
22 November 2019

Thirty-two hundred Canadian National (CN) railway conductors, train operators and yardmen will enter their fourth day of strike action against the giant transport company on Friday, Nov. 22.

Demands have been made from all quarters of the financial and political elite for Justin Trudeau's Liberal government to quickly bring in back-to-work legislation to criminalize the strike.

Members of the Teamsters Canada Rail Conference (TCRC) union, the strikers are fighting to end the company's grueling and unsafe work and scheduling practices. These have resulted in a steady stream of worker injuries, health degradation, intrusive management surveillance schemes, train accidents and the virtual elimination of any normal home life for CN workers. Now, CN management is demanding a punitive lifetime capping of prescription drug coverage that would deny workers and their families proper treatment for some cancers, rheumatoid arthritis, diabetes and other diseases.

However, the captains of corporate Canada could not care less about the plight of these workers. Within 24 hours of the beginning of the strike, appeals to the government to end the job action and force binding arbitration—which invariably favours management—flooded into Ottawa. Executives from the oil, mining, agribusiness, forestry and manufacturing sectors all weighed in with dire warnings of national economic crisis, mass layoffs and farmer bankruptcies if the strike continues.

Pierre Gratton of the Mining Association of Canada went a step further, calling on the government to consider permanently imposing compulsory binding arbitration in all future large rail contract disputes. But it was left to Veronique Proulx, head of the Manufacturers and Exporters of Quebec, to say what all of her colleagues had foremost on their minds. "Large amounts of money are involved," she declared.

Multi-national investment bank Credit Suisse issued an analyst's note as the strike began. It remarked that a labour stoppage may temporarily limit CN's freight volumes, but would not likely have "a meaningful long-term impact on the company's earnings," since federal governments have historically intervened quickly to end rail strikes.

Both federal Liberal and Conservative governments have repeatedly imposed legislation to send strikers back to work across numerous industries. Since 1950 they have used strike-breaking legislation on 30 separate occasions whilst provincial governments of all stripes, from Conservative and Parti Quebecois to NDP, have similarly acted to attack workers' democratic right to strike.

In recent years, as a result of both corporate Canada's drive to roll back worker rights and the cross-Canada state assault on public services and the jobs and working conditions of the workers who administer them, the criminalization of strikes has become more and more the norm.

Federal Conservative Party leader Andrew Scheer and Alberta's United Conservative Party Energy Minister Sonya Savage have each separately demanded that Trudeau immediately recall Parliament to end the strike. On Thursday, Quebec CAQ Premier Francois Legault, citing a looming shortage of propane supplies in that province, appealed to all the opposition parties to cooperate with the Liberals in ensuring speedy passage of a back-to-work law.

Currently, the federal parliament is not due to reconvene until December 5.

Trudeau, who had no compunction last year about banning a limited, rotating strike by 50,000 postal workers, is hoping to rely on the services of the Teamsters to shut the strike down. At the head of a minority government, Trudeau is in the midst of brokering an alliance with the New Democrats and the trade unions to gain the requisite parliamentary support to demonstrate that his government has the "confidence" of the House of Commons.

As in Trudeau's first term, a "progressive" union/NDP-backed Liberal government will use identity politics and hollow rhetoric about assisting working people to push through a right-wing big business agenda, including massive hikes in military spending.

However, Trudeau's "progressive" credentials will take yet another battering if the first law to be enacted by the new parliament proves to be legislation criminalizing the CN rail strike. Hence, his preference to first see if he can prevail on the

© World Socialist Web Site

Teamsters to end the strike.

In remarks Wednesday, Transport Minister Mark Garneau indicated that the Teamsters are on the verge of selling out the strike. Referring to the ongoing negotiations between the union and CN Rail in Montreal, Garneau declared that there is "light at the end of the tunnel" and that a "solution is in their grasp." He then proceeded to make an implicit threat, stating, "We also believe in the collective bargaining process so we're going to make sure they know how important this is and that they have to continue working towards a solution." The government will "push them as hard as we can, because this is very important from the economy perspective."

In other words, Garneau and the Liberals' bogus pose as defenders of "collective bargaining" will only last so long as such "negotiations" lead to a quick end to the strike and on terms favourable to Canada's corporate elite. Otherwise, the government will intervene to end the walkout with all of the methods at its disposal, including back-to-work legislation.

The Liberals know that in the Teamsters they have a reliable partner for scuttling strikes and imposing rotten concessions deals. In 2012, the union submitted without a fight when the Harper Conservative government criminalized a strike by over 3,000 train operators at Canadian Pacific (CP), the country's second major rail company. Three years later, the mere threat by Labour Minister Kellie Leitch to outlaw possible industrial action was enough for the Teamsters to call off a planned strike at CP.

A strike by Canadian Pacific rail workers in May 2018 was sabotaged by the Teamsters 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 they called 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 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.

CN recorded a profit of $1.2 billion on total revenue of $3.8 billion in the third quarter of 2019. Over the past year, CN share prices have increased by a whopping 21 percent. Just three days before the strike began, CN management unveiled a further onslaught on the workforce, announcing 1,600 job cuts, which will fall primarily on white collar workers.

The conditions facing CN workers are appalling. Workers can toil for 70 hours or more per week. As one striker told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "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."

Work rules, according to a union statement, require employees "to operate trains alone from outside of the locomotive, hanging on to moving trains with one hand while operating a remotely controlled locomotive with the other. Railroaders are expected to do this in rain and in freezing temperatures, sometimes for distances of up to about 17 miles."

The impact of such a regimen endangers not only rail workers, but entire communities, as seen by the 48 deaths following a train explosion in Lac-Megantic, Quebec in 2012. Sleep-related fatigue has been a contributing factor in at least 31 railway accidents and 90 incident investigations over the past 27 years. The problem of sleep deprivation, grueling schedules and single-person operations is an industry-wide issue.

The complicity of the Teamsters with the rail bosses in recommending contracts that attack jobs and working conditions and gut safety has led to the current eruption of militancy amongst rank-and-file rail workers. The workers involved voted for strike action by a 99.2 percent margin. But the strikers' contract demands cannot be achieved by appealing to the union bureaucracy to fight.

Instead, striking 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 to railway workers in companies based in the United States, who all confront the same terrible working conditions.

Any government attempt to criminalize the CN strike must be answered by a working-class industrial and political counter-offensive, mobilizing the entire working class against concessions, jobs cuts, the dismantling of public services and the ever-expanding battery of anti-worker laws.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site