Montreal dockers face looming threat of Trudeau back-to-work law on second day of strike

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Yesterday at 7:00 a.m., 1,150 dockers at the Port of Montreal launched an indefinite strike. Underscoring that the workers' struggle is above all a political fight, the federal Liberal government led by Justin Trudeau is rushing to pass antidemocratic strikebreaking legislation little more than a day after the job action began.

Without a contract since December 2018, the Montreal dockworkers are waging a determined fight against the Maritime Employers Association's (MEA) attempts to impose regressive changes to their working conditions.

Siding with the employer, Canada's Minister of Labour Filomena Tassi filed notice on parliament's legislative agenda last Friday of the government's intention to introduce a back-to-work bill, setting the stage for its adoption as early as this morning.

The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 375, of which the dockers are members, has already made clear that it intends to capitulate to the back-to-work legislation, as every trade union across Canada has done for decades.

At a press conference held on April 24 announcing the deadline for the impending strike, CUPE Local 375 President Michel Murray pledged to call it off "immediately" if the MEA lifted its latest unilateral changes to dockers' working conditions, while reiterating that the union's priority was to be at the bargaining table.

Then on Monday, Murray all but announced the union's intention to bow subserviently to the Trudeau government's back-to-work law, saying, "I have no hope there will be a resolution today. The employer will just sit on their hands and wait to see the content of Minister Tassi's special legislation. The government has completely unbalanced the relations between the two parties. They resorted to the atomic bomb."

Despite voting three times in favor of strike action since their contract expired at the end of 2018, the Montreal longshore workers were prevented by reactionary labour laws and stalling on the part of the CUPE leadership from striking until July 2020, when a limited strike action took place. The following month an all-out strike was launched. It was sabotaged by the union after only 12 days but not before demonstrating the enormous social power of the dockworkers.

The strike, which brought operations to a complete halt at Canada's second largest port which handles about $100 billion in cargo each year, cost wholesalers $600 million, according to the employers' associations. CUPE, however, was quick to put an end to it and to conclude a seven-month "truce" with management during which no job action was allowed.

On March 21, 2021, the same day that this "truce" ended, the Port of Montreal workers rejected a concessions-laden contract offer by an overwhelming majority of 99.7 percent. In response, the MEA stepped up its provocations and attacks, as well as calls for Ottawa to intervene and criminalize any strike by the dockworkers.

On March 29, the MEA bought an advertisement in all the major Montreal newspapers denouncing the "generous conditions" of dockworkers in an effort to turn public opinion, and especially other sections of the working class, against them.

On April 10, it announced a partial lockout by suspending guaranteed-income contract clauses and withholding payment for unworked time.

Then, on April 22, the MEA announced that it would change work schedules effective April 26, eliminating shifts and replacing them with a continuous work schedule.

CUPE responded to these provocations with a few token protest measures. Following the April 10 partial lockout and several days of further negotiations in the presence of federal "mediators," Murray said he was confident that an agreement could be reached. "We still believe in bargaining and look forward to a return to the table," the CUPE leader insisted, even as management was intensifying its vicious attacks on workers and pleading for federal government intervention.

CUPE then sent out a partial strike notice affecting overtime and weekend work, while reassuring the business community that it would be harmless and toothless. "We are putting pressure on the employer without disturbing the customers who are waiting for their goods," the union insisted. It went on to praise the MEA for the fact that "for the first time in seven months, the employer has actually negotiated."

These pathetic appeals to the employer were a continuation of

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the union's attempts to isolate and demobilize the dockworkers since the beginning of the long conflict.

What the CUPE bureaucrats fear, above all, is that the resistance of the Port of Montreal workers could become the spark of a broader working class movement in opposition to the big business assault on jobs and working conditions and the entire agenda of capitalist austerity.

This is why they are doing everything they can to contain the Montreal port workers' militant struggle within the framework of the Canada Labour Code and standard "collective bargaining" practices. This legal regime favors the employers and subordinates the actions of workers to a series of rules and technicalities aimed at keeping them isolated and in a straitjacket.

The ruling class is presenting a united front against the dockworkers. Business associations, the mainstream media and capitalist politicians of all stripes have publicly denounced the "economic consequences" of the strike—that is, its impact on profits—and demanded the intervention of Justin Trudeau's federal government. The latest example came Monday in a joint letter signed by Quebec Premier François Legault and Ontario Premier Doug Ford.

On April 13, the Montreal Port Authority issued an open letter denouncing the effects of the dispute on "thousands of importers and exporters." While paying lip service to negotiations, the letter, with its references to "essential and priority services" and "strategic infrastructure," was a clear call for strikebreaking legislation.

On the same day, a coalition of business groups, including Montreal's Board of Trade, the Quebec Employers Federation and Quebec Manufacturers & Exporters Association, held a press conference to denounce the union's limited job action. One of its main demands was that the federal Minister of Labour act with "firmness" and "demand an immediate return to normal activities."

Ottawa has repeatedly signaled that it is prepared to outlaw a dockers strike. Soon after workers massively rejected the employer's offer on March 21, the influential, Liberal-aligned Montreal daily *La presse* reported that back-to-work legislation had been presented to Trudeau and discussed by his cabinet. With the notice tabled on Friday by Labour Minister Tassi, there is no doubt that the Liberal government is preparing to criminalize the dockworkers struggle.

In this, it will enjoy the full support of the other big business parties in the House of Commons—not only the Conservatives and the Bloc Québécois, but also the social democratic NDP, whose nominal opposition to strikebreaking legislation is a form of political theater, given its repeated commitments to prop up the minority Liberal government.

The Trudeau government's intervention on behalf of the employer to help enforce its concession demands underscores that the struggle faced by dockers is above all political. A fight for even their most immediate demands, including manageable work schedules, no speedup, and the ending of oppressive workplace discipline regimes, immediately pits the dockers against the entire ruling elite and its state institutions.

But the struggle waged by the dockers has an even more powerful ally: the working class throughout Montreal, across Canada and internationally. The mobilization of its full social power in a political struggle against the class war agenda of big business and its governments is the only way that the dockers can prevail.

The first step in fighting for this program should be the formation by dockers of a rank-and-file strike committee to take control of their struggle out of the hands of the procapitalist union apparatus.

This strike committee must begin immediate preparations to defy any back-to-work law. This requires making the strongest appeal to all workers, whether in industry or public sector, who are likewise facing an all-out assault on their working conditions and social rights. Only by broadening the struggle and making it a working class political struggle can the strikers resist the Trudeau government's draconian back-to-work legislation and secure their just demands.

Dockworkers at the Port of Montreal must turn to their class brothers and sisters across Canada and internationally, including at the Port of Los Angeles where truck drivers recently entered into struggle.

Only in this way can their struggle become the spearhead of a counteroffensive by the entire working class against capitalist austerity, the homicidal back-to-work drive of the ruling elite in the midst of a raging pandemic and its criminalization of workers strikes.

We encourage all dockworkers who agree with this program to make plans to attend this Saturday's online May Day rally held by the International Committee of the Fourth International. It will discuss a strategy for workers to unify their struggles around the world through building the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

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