

Railroad workers at Canadian Pacific vote overwhelmingly to authorize strike action

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Do you work at Canadian Pacific or another railroad? Contact us and tell us about the issues you confront. All published comments will be kept anonymous.

More than 3,000 railroad workers at Canadian Pacific have voted to authorize strike action by 96.7 percent, the Teamsters union in Canada announced on February 28. The strike, which could begin as soon as March 16, would be the fourth at the railroad in a decade, following strikes in 2012, 2015 and 2018.

At issue for the workers—who include locomotive engineers, conductors, trainpersons and yardpersons—are wages, pensions and benefits. Canadian Pacific (CP), which operates mainly in Western Canada and the American Midwest, is one of the seven Class I railroads in the United States.

The strike vote is the latest indication of a growing mood of opposition and militancy among rail workers in North America. In January, 17,000 BNSF conductors and engineers voted to authorize strike action against management's unilateral imposition of a new "Hi-Viz" attendance policy, which threatens to eliminate whatever remaining personal time workers have and set up high-seniority workers for termination. However, the strike was blocked by a federal court injunction, which has been confirmed repeatedly in subsequent rulings.

The Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET) is a division within the Teamsters union. However, the BLET has not mentioned a word about the strike vote at CP on its website or social media pages, nor have the Teamsters in Canada mentioned the struggle of BNSF workers in the United States, demonstrating the manner in which the pro-corporate unions seek to isolate and sabotage the struggles of workers along sectional and national lines.

Instead, the BLET has focused all of its attention on enforcing the anti-strike injunction and threatening and intimidating workers for seeking to oppose it, or even for speaking to the press. While voting was still underway in Canada, the BLET was reacting furiously against the courageous decision by workers to found the BNSF Workers Rank-and-File Committee.

In its founding statement, the committee declared that its aim was to "organize railway workers ourselves as an alternative source of power against management, well-heeled union bureaucrats and 'government by injunction.'" The committee

said it would "appeal to our most powerful allies, the international working class, for support," including "workers in the other Class I carriers who are facing similar attendance policies."

In the United States, the anti-democratic Railway Labor Act, first enacted in 1926, is designed to all but legalize strikes on the railroads. In the words of the judge who issued the injunction, the Act sets out "a mandatory and 'virtually endless' process of 'negotiation, mediation, voluntary arbitration, and conciliation.'" Indeed, BNSF workers have been kept on the job for two years without a contract.

Labor laws in Canada are not quite as onerous as in the "Land of the Free," but the government still regularly intervenes against strikes, particularly in the railroad industry. It has long been common practice, for example, for Parliament to pass special legislation to outlaw a particular strike and order railroaders back to work.

Under the current Liberal Party government of Justin Trudeau, the preferred method has been to enlist the services of the unions in preventing or shutting down strikes. This is the Canadian equivalent of Biden's self-declared "most pro-union administration in American history," in which the White House has employed the trade union bureaucracy to place workers under a de facto form of state guardianship. This strategy has been increasingly apparent at both BNSF and in the oil industry, where the United Steelworkers is rapidly moving to enforce a sellout contract on 30,000 refinery workers after several meetings with Biden and other officials.

Trudeau was able to rely on the Teamsters to sell out strikes at Canadian Pacific in 2018 and Canadian National in 2019 with contracts which abandoned all of workers' key demands. These strikes were over cuts to health care, plans by the railroads to move to one-person crews for trains, and onerous work schedules—the exact same issues which American railroad workers confront.

However, while the Teamsters effusively praised Trudeau's supposedly more "moderate" stance, Ottawa held in reserve preparations for direct government intervention to criminalize the strikes. At the same time, Teamsters Canada President François Laporte pledged his support for the profitability of CN, declaring, "I understand we [the union] have to meet the

[company's] bottom line but on our side, we have to protect our people.”

The experience in Canada exposes the self-serving claims by the BLET that their hands are tied by the injunction. North of the border, where workers are fighting against the exact same issues, the same union sabotages their struggles without even the need for court injunctions. This shows that the unions are nothing but adjuncts of management and the government controlled by wealthy bureaucrats, for whom injunctions are only extra ammunition against rank-and-file opposition.

There can be no doubt that there will be heavy pressure from both Biden and Trudeau to prevent a strike from taking place at Canadian Pacific. Within financial and corporate circles there are concerns about not only the economic but also the geopolitical consequences upon supply chains which this strike could have. Indeed, this was also the dominant consideration behind the injunction at BNSF, as Judge Mark Pittman explicitly referred to supply chains in his original ruling and quoted Harry Truman, who used wartime measures against strikers during World War II and the Korean War.

A strike at CP could threaten fertilizer supplies to the United States on the eve of the planting season, Bloomberg News reported, under conditions where food prices are already on the rise due to the war between Ukraine and Russia, two of the world's main grain exporters.

On Thursday, the world's biggest crop-nutrient supplier, Nutrien Ltd., released a statement calling on the Trudeau government to intervene to block the strike, writing, “We would be very disappointed to see a labor dispute have such a significant impact on global agricultural supply chains, and consequently, we would hope that the Canadian government will consider intervening to avert another transportation crisis.”

While Nutrien cynically cites concern for global food supplies as its motivation, crasser material interests are at work. A strike could threaten the ability of North American agribusiness to capitalize on higher food prices and reap super-profits as a result of the conflict in Ukraine, which was stoked and encouraged by the United States and NATO.

In spite of official hand-wringing over the inviolability of supply chains, the small group of hedge funds and wealthy investors who control the railroad industry have driven both the workforce and infrastructure of the railroads into the ground in their drive to squeeze out every last cent of profit. BNSF is owned by Berkshire Hathaway, which is in turn owned by Warren Buffett, the eighth-richest person in the world, with a fortune over \$110 billion. Bill Gates, the fourth-richest, is the largest shareholder in Canadian National (CN).

The grotesquely misnamed London hedge fund The Children's Investment Fund Management (TCI) is the largest shareholder in CP, but also owns a significant stake in rival firm CN. At both companies, TCI is pushing for greater consolidation and massive cuts. Decades of consolidation in the industry have reduced the number of Class I railroads in the US

from hundreds to seven, and this will soon be reduced to six due to the \$31 billion merger between Canadian Pacific and Kansas City Southern struck late last year. The new company will be known as Canadian Pacific Kansas City.

KCS, while it is the smallest and weakest of the Class I railroads, nevertheless controls vital rail linkages between the American Southwest and Mexico. The merger would create “the world's first transnational railway,” one industry commentator said, with a single network stretching from oil fields and crop producers in Canada's Prairie Provinces, to major port facilities in New Orleans and Houston, down into the Mexican state of Veracruz on the Gulf Coast.

In a demonstration of how the industry is controlled and manipulated by a tiny handful within the financial aristocracy, TCI moved aggressively against a CN bid for Kansas City Southern in order to prevent a bidding war and secure the success of the bid by CP. It is now campaigning for significant cost-savings at CN, citing impending competition due to the merger by rivals which it itself played a major role in brokering.

The trade unions, even those that operate in multiple countries, seek to divide workers by nationality and have no answer to the relentless assault on living standards and working conditions. The working class must oppose the capitalists' global strategy of consolidation and cost-cutting with their own international strategy, based on the unity of railroad workers in the United States, Canada, Mexico and around the world. This means organizing a network of rank-and-file committees independent of the unions, in order to carry a united struggle against brutal scheduling, pay and benefit cuts and deteriorating infrastructure.



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