

# CP Rail issues 72-hour lockout notice for 3,000 railway workers

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*Do you work at CP Rail or elsewhere in the rail industry? Contact us to tell us what you think of CP's decision to impose a lockout.*

In a highly provocative move, CP Rail is threatening to lock out 3,000 engineers, conductors, and yardmen across Canada by 12:01 a.m. Sunday. Canada's second-largest largest railroad issued the required 72-hour advance notice for a lockout late Wednesday.

With its lockout threat, CP Rail management is seeking to rally big business across North America and the state behind its drive to impose yet another round of concessions and speed-up on railroad workers. Already, demands are mounting from business and political leaders for the Liberal government to use emergency back-to-work legislation to strip CP Rail workers of their rights to strike and bargain collectively, as Ottawa has repeatedly done or threatened to do in other major contract disputes.

The ruling class is determined to suppress the eruption of a major working-class struggle amid the economic turmoil produced by the drive to war with Russia and the COVID-19 pandemic.

"For the sake of our employees, our customers, the supply chain we serve and the Canadian economy that is trying to recover from multiple disruptions, we simply cannot prolong for weeks or months the uncertainty associated with a potential labour disruption," stated CP Rail CEO Keith Creel. "The world has never needed Canada's resources and an efficient transportation system to deliver them more than it does today. Delaying resolution would only make things worse. We take this action with a view to bringing this uncertainty to an end."

Creel's statement sums up the entire ruling elite's arrogance and hostility towards the working class. The talk of "Canada's resources" being required on the "world market" is a none-too-subtle reference to how Canadian business is licking its chops at the prospect of super-profits in the world market caused by US-NATO sanctions against their Russia competitors. As far as corporate Canada is concerned, nothing—especially a vote to strike, which is now contemptuously dismissed as a threatened "labour disruption," i.e., something irregular and illegitimate—will be allowed to get in the way.

Rail workers and their relatives who spoke to the *World*

*Socialist Web Site* denounced the onerous and dangerous working conditions at the company. A family member of a CP Rail worker said, "These men are told to move the train at all costs. They basically risk death moving unsafe freight or speak up and lose your job. CP's announcement of a lockout is not surprising at all, they are greed-motivated. In 2020, there was over \$6 million given out as bonuses, \$800,000 was tied to their safety performance, in a year that saw four employee deaths. In my opinion, the entire company is a fraud."

While lecturing the world about "democracy" and "human rights" in Ukraine, Canada's rigged "labour relations" system, like its counterpart in the United States, is designed to run roughshod over workers' democratic rights in order to always produce a pro-employer outcome. CP Rail has been engaged in so-called "collective bargaining" since September with the Teamsters Canada Rail Conference (TCRC). Last month, federal Labour Minister Seamus O'Reagan appointed a mediator to the talks. Since March 11, talks have been proceeding non-stop under the mediator's guidance.

The TCRC statement in response to the lockout notice was a pathetic, grovelling appeal to CP Rail. The union, which has not lifted a finger to mobilize support in the working class, now admits that everyone involved in the talks knew management was planning a lockout. "It was well known that CP was going to force a work stoppage and lockout our members," commented TCRC spokesperson Dave Fulton. "They have done just that. CP continues to dismiss our members' demands and are unwilling to negotiate issues they have created."

The TCRC statement is a devastating self-indictment. Throughout the negotiation process, the union has done everything to keep workers in the dark about what is going on and to delay the calling of a strike. CP Rail workers voted almost unanimously in favour of a strike last month, with 96.7 percent backing job action. The TCRC reported the vote in a cursory press release on March 4. It then said nothing further about either the negotiations or worker job action until its Wednesday release responding to CP Rail's lockout threat.

If Fulton and his fellow bureaucrats knew that "CP was going to force a work stoppage and lockout its members" and "continues to dismiss our members' demands," why didn't they issue a 72-hour strike notice at the earliest opportunity on

March 13? Had they done so, CP Rail workers could have launched a strike as soon as it became legally possible to do so under Canada's reactionary labour relations system, and appealed for support from workers across the transportation, energy, and other sectors. They would then have been in a much more powerful position to bring CP Rail to its knees and force management to concede to their entirely legitimate demands. As it is, the TCRC's dithering has allowed CP Rail to activate its "work stoppage contingency plan" on its own terms.

The TCRC and the unions as a whole do not represent the interests of rank-and-file workers, but those of their well-paid leaders and a phalanx of functionaries, whose focus is on maintaining their cozy corporatist partnership with management and the state. For more than four decades, the Teamsters and its counterparts in the auto, manufacturing, mining, energy, and other sectors have presided over one round of concessions after another. In the name of "reaching a deal at the bargaining table" and "negotiating" collective agreements, they have systematically suppressed the class struggle. They have done so by blocking strike action, isolating those strikes they couldn't prevent, and policing the enforcement of back-to-work legislation imposed by the provincial and federal governments.

Under conditions of rampant inflation driven by the COVID-19 pandemic's disruption of supply chains and the sanctions on Russia, the unions' role in suppressing the class struggle becomes all the more critical for big business. This was acknowledged by O'Reagan in his statement following CP Rail's lockout notice. "Our government respects and has faith in the collective bargaining process, because we know that the best deals are the ones reached by the parties at the bargaining table." On cue, the TCRC chimed in, "We remain committed to reaching an acceptable agreement that addresses our members' issues."

No CP Rail worker can take this blather seriously. How is it possible to talk in any meaningful sense of a "negotiated deal" with the threat of a lockout or a government back-to-work law stripping workers of the right to strike looming? In truth, developments at the much-revered "bargaining table" resemble nothing so much as a conspiracy between company management, the government and the Teamsters to prevent workers from fighting for their demands.

If the TCRC and government remain "committed" to anything, it is the prevention of any genuine struggle by rail workers for better wages, workplace benefits, pension rights, and work schedules. They rightly recognize that such a struggle could become the catalyst for a broader mobilization of workers across all economic sectors, who have seen how the capitalist elite has treated them like disposable goods during the pandemic while massively enriching itself at their expense.

Rail workers in the United States confront equally ruthless attacks from their employers and state institutions. Workers at

BNSF voted overwhelmingly for strike action earlier this year to prevent the introduction of the punishing Hi Viz scheduling system. The company responded by securing a court injunction prohibiting a strike and banning the workers from taking any action that could be considered "self-help."

At BNSF, rail workers have established the BNSF Workers Rank-and-File Committee to take the struggle for improved working conditions, wages, and benefits out of the hands of the corrupt union bureaucracy. Earlier this week, the committee issued a statement of solidarity to CP Rail workers entitled "Support strike action at Canadian Pacific! For a united movement of North American railroaders against wage cuts and brutal working hours!"

The statement declared, "All of this proves the need for a united struggle, bringing together workers across the Class I railroads in North America. We propose to you and to the workers at the other railroads to establish contact, discuss common strategy and build a powerful movement, organized through rank-and-file committees, independent of both the pro-corporate unions and the corporate political parties in each country.

"The first principle of this movement should be the international unity of the working class across national boundaries. We must reject 'America First,' 'Canada First' and 'Mexico First' rhetoric for what they are, attempts to divide us against each other. In reality, we are all fighting for the same thing. This includes:

- "An immediate end to 'Hi Viz,' Precision Scheduled Railroading, and all other brutal scheduling regimes.
- "Full funding for our pensions, including the restoration of all cuts.
- "Cost-of-Living Adjustments in order to insulate us from the impact of inflation.
- "A permanent end to the industry-wide campaign for single-person crews."

CP Rail workers should follow the example of their class brothers and sisters at BNSF, form a rank-and-file committee in opposition to the corporatist Teamster apparatus, and link their struggle to that of railway and other workers across North America.



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