

Canadian Pacific locks out 3,000 railroad workers across Canada

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Are you a worker at CP Rail or in the rail industry? Contact us to share your experiences and help build a rank-and-file committee at CP.

CP Rail, Canada's second-largest rail operator, locked out 3,000 engineers, conductors, and yardmen at its operations across Canada at 12:01 a.m. Sunday. Business groups and provincial premiers are lining up to demand that rail workers be sent back to work and stripped of their rights to strike and bargain collectively by anti-democratic government legislation.

The company provocatively filed a 72-hour lockout notice late Wednesday, following federally-mediated talks with the Teamsters Canada Rail Conference (TCRC) beginning March 11. Rail workers had earlier voted by an overwhelming 96.7 percent for strike action last month, but were prevented from doing so by the TCRC, who refused to issue a strike notice until 24 hours after the lockout was announced, a toothless gesture. Pickets were set up Sunday across the country, including in Toronto and Montreal.

The CP workers deserve the widest possible support in the working class. The conditions which they are fighting against—a ruthless scheduling regime enforced with draconian disciplinary measures, a cap on pensions, stagnant wages and workplace benefits—are the same issues which workers everywhere confront.

The decision to lock out the CP Rail workers, meanwhile, is a declaration of war against the entire working class by corporate Canada. While appealing for “unity” in a purported struggle for “freedom” and “democracy” in Ukraine, they are resorting to the most ruthless, antidemocratic methods in a bid to break the growing movement in the working class driven by record inflation and the disastrous impact of the pandemic.

This campaign is being waged across North America. The lockout follows an injunction, originally issued in January and since repeatedly upheld, by a federal judge in the United States which banned a strike by 17,000 conductors and engineers at another Class I railroad, BNSF, against a punitive new “Hi Viz” attendance policy.

In a statement last week, the BNSF Workers Rank-and-File Committee, founded to oppose both the pro-corporate injunction and the sabotage of their struggles by the railroad unions, issued a statement, “Support strike action at Canadian Pacific! For a united movement of North American railroaders against wage cuts and brutal working hours!” The committee called on workers at CP to form a rank-and-file committee of their own and link up with BNSF workers to “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 company is absolutely brutal towards its workers... The workers are being abused in more ways than you can imagine,” one CP worker told the *World Socialist Web Site*. Another responded to an interview with a CP worker the WSWs published Saturday, which he described as “bang on.” He added, “Yet more details should be voiced, regarding the bully tactics local managers put forward. The working conditions are terrible.”

Canadian Pacific justified its aggressive moves by referring to high commodity prices due to the pandemic's disruption of supply chains and the sweeping sanctions imposed on Russia after it was goaded by the US and its allies, including Canada, into invading Ukraine. CP Rail chief executive Keith Creel insisted that “Canadian resources,” i.e., oil and gas as well as agricultural goods such as fertilizer, are needed on the “world market” more than ever.

But this statement is contradicted by management's own decision to lock out the workforce. The lockout proves that the driving consideration is not supplying critical resources to consumers but maximizing profits and share values. Indeed, corporations across North America expect to reel in windfall profits from the spike in commodity prices due to the sudden removal of their Russian competition from the world market.

CP Rail has declared its bitter opposition to lifting the pension cap, which remains one of the main issues in the

dispute. Rail workers say the current cap, imposed in 2012 when the company was struggling financially, means they can't retire on a livable pension after decades of physically demanding work to pad the portfolios of CP's shareholders. Chief financial officer Nadim Velani told a conference of New York investors last Tuesday that the company would not budge on the pension cap.

Immediately after the lockout came into force, CP Rail sought cynically to blame its workers for the "disruption." It asserted that the TCRC "withdrew its services" and "misrepresented the status of the talks." This is a calculated effort to appeal to the Liberal government to intervene against workers with back-to-work legislation.

Some 45 business organizations signed a statement to the federal Liberal government calling on its intervention to end the dispute. Canadian Chamber of Commerce chief executive Perrin Beatty demanded Sunday that the government enforce back-to-work legislation to criminalize strike action by rail workers, according to the *Toronto Star*. The same demand has been raised by Saskatchewan Premier Scott Moe and Alberta Premier Jason Kenney.

A similar corporate campaign is under way in the US. On March 7, agribusiness groups wrote to president Joe Biden urging him to cooperate with the Trudeau government to avert a strike at CP. The letter also appealed to Biden to end cross-border COVID-19 vaccine mandates for transport workers. "Given the fragility of current supply chains, urgent attention and engagement with all parties is needed to avert a potential strike," the letter stated.

Separate letters were sent by a group of Republican senators and the Governor of North Dakota to Trudeau urging him to block a strike at CP.

Over the past decade, successive governments have outlawed job action by rail workers and imposed attacks on their wages and conditions through Canada's pro-employer "labour relations" system. They have been ably assisted in this by the Teamsters, which have worked to sabotage worker opposition and prevent a genuine struggle for workers' interests.

The role of the TCRC is the same in the current dispute. After it announced the overwhelming vote to authorize a strike in a short press release March 4, it then maintained radio silence while it carried out behind-closed-doors talks with CP and a Canadian federal mediator until the employer issued its lockout notice. Later, the TCRC admitted that CP had threatened repeatedly to lock workers out, which the union did nothing to warn workers about.

After management's lockout began Sunday, the TCRC continued to grovel before the company, stating that it had offered to consider binding arbitration. Commenting that the Teamsters would be "willing to explore an arbitrator's

decision," TCRC spokesman Dave Fulton added, "they then moved the goal posts when it came time to discuss the terms of final and binding arbitration." Clearly, CP Rail responded to yet another union concession by pushing for an even stricter definition of the arbitrator's mandate to ensure that the company got what it wanted from the decision, forcing the union to balk.

An arbitrator is a government-appointed official whose ruling is legally binding on both sides. Arbitrators invariably impose settlements on labour disputes on the employers' terms, backed up with a ban on strike action for the duration of the newly enforced collective agreement. This amounts to an appeal by the Teamsters for the Canadian government to intervene to impose concessions on the backs of workers.

The TCRC knows that the mood among rail workers is explosive, and that there is widespread support existing for a mass movement for improvements to wages, conditions and pensions. This is precisely what it wants to avoid. Now that the lockout has been carried out, the union will work tirelessly to isolate rail workers on picket lines as it continues to beg for a deal with management.

The critical task now facing CP Rail workers is to take their struggle forward by establishing a CP Rail workers rank-and-file committee. This committee must be entirely independent of and in opposition to the corrupt Teamsters, and aimed at unifying rail workers across North America in struggle against the rail operators.

It must build solidarity among broader sections of workers for a unified political struggle to beat back the attacks of the corporations and pro-war, pro-austerity governments in Ottawa and Washington, which want to make workers accept ruthless exploitation to guarantee corporate profits.

The *World Socialist Web Site* will provide workers with all the organizational assistance and political leadership necessary to establish a rank-and-file committee at CP Rail to intensify their fight for better wages and conditions. Contact us to join this struggle.



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