

The Canadian Pacific lockout and UK ferry mass sackings: Ruling class ruthlessness in response to growing class struggle

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20 March 2022

In response to growing resistance within the working class internationally to falling living standards, brutal working conditions and the ongoing disaster triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, the ruling class is reviving all its old methods of repression and class war, including lockouts, mass firings and anti-strike court injunctions.

Early Sunday morning, Canadian Pacific (CP) Railway shut down operations as a 72-hour lockout deadline previously issued by the company was reached. The 3,000 workers at the railroad, the sixth largest in North America, had voted nearly unanimously for strike action last month, determined to overturn work schedules that do not allow adequate rest and to secure major improvements to wages and pensions.

The Teamsters union, which has kept workers in the dark about its talks with CP throughout negotiations, belatedly issued a strike notice on Thursday. Aware of the anger among workers over the company's arrogant and dictatorial moves, the union, in an attempt at saving face, announced Saturday night that it was initiating a strike in addition to the company's lockout.

Canadian and US business interests are both braying for the government of Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to intervene to shut down the work stoppage.

Canadian Chamber of Commerce President Perrin Beatty called on Liberal Labour Minister Seamus O'Reagan to immediately bring forward legislation forcing a return to work, saying, "This work stoppage will have a deep and adverse impact for all Canadian businesses—both big and small—who rely on rail for their supply chain. This severe damage to Canadian supply chains at a time of heightened global uncertainty will extend beyond our borders and harm our reputation as a reliable partner in international trade."

Last week, several US Republican senators and the governor of North Dakota also sent separate letters demanding Trudeau intervene to block a work stoppage, pointing to the sharp run-up in fuel prices and agricultural supply shortages due to the war in Ukraine as justification. Canadian Pacific carries goods as far south as Kansas City in the US and is a major transporter of crude oil and potash, a critical fertilizer ingredient.

Behind the cynical professions of concern for the impact of rising gas and food prices on consumers, the ruling class is more and more demanding that austerity be imposed and workers' struggles suppressed in service of the "national interest" and preparations for war with Russia.

The ruthless moves of Canadian Pacific management, on the one hand, and the determination of rail workers to improve their living and working conditions, on the other, are part of a broader intensification of the class struggle internationally:

- In Britain, P&O Ferries fired its entire 800-person workforce on the spot Thursday. The company, which provides passenger and freight transport to several European ports, brought in private security guards to force workers to immediately gather up their belongings and vacate the ships, replacing them with agency (contract) workers paid a fraction as much. In response, ferry workers in Hull initially drew up gangplanks and refused to allow police or replacements onto their vessels, while workers in Dover blocked roads and access to the port, before security personnel eventually forced them to leave. On Friday, hundreds of workers and their family members demonstrated in the affected cities, chanting in Dover, "Seize the ships now!"

- In India, over 70,000 workers with the Maharashtra State Road Transport Corporation (MSRTC) bus agency have been striking for 20 weeks, repeatedly defying government back-to-work orders and threats of mass arrests. The walkout has taken place in opposition to roughly two dozen trade unions, which bowed before the injunction and refused to sanction the strike. The workers are demanding that the agency be merged with the state government to secure better pay and benefits, as well as compensation to the families of 700 workers who have died from COVID-19. MSRTC has fired over 2,216 of the strikers and suspended another 12,207.

- In Spain, an estimated 75,000 truck drivers launched an indefinite strike last Monday over surging fuel prices and poor working conditions. The Spanish state, helmed by a coalition government between the Socialist Party (PSOE) and pseudo-left Podemos party, has responded ferociously. Last week, a 33-year-old striker was shot and seriously wounded by an

undercover cop, and the PSOE-Podemos government has announced it is mobilizing more than 23,000 police to crush the strike.

- In the US, a federal judge last month upheld an anti-strike injunction against 17,000 BNSF rail workers. The court ruling, basing itself on the reactionary Railway Labor Act, stipulated that workers were barred from “authorizing, encouraging, permitting, calling, or otherwise engaging in any strikes, work stoppages, picketing, slowdowns, sickouts, or other self-help against BNSF or its operating rail subsidiaries.” Earlier this year, workers voted overwhelmingly to strike against a widely hated and punitive “Hi-Viz” attendance policy, which the company unilaterally imposed on February 1.

- On Sunday, the Democratic Party-dominated Minneapolis Public Schools board issued their “last, best and final offer” for educational support professionals, in a bid to end a strike by roughly 4,500 educators. Provocatively, the school board announced that raising wages even modestly for support staff—who are paid so little that some are forced to sleep in their cars—would be predicated on \$10 million in cuts to the budget next year.

With a rapidly escalating war drive by the US and its NATO allies underway, the trade unions are redoubling their efforts to impose the dictates of the corporations and the state, either blocking strikes or, if unable to, seeking to keep them isolated. In turn, capitalist governments, particularly the Biden administration, are relying ever-more heavily on the largely discredited unions to try to suppress resistance.

In Canada, the Trudeau government has thus far held off on directly intervening to end the rail work stoppage, instead pressuring the Teamsters to come to a deal with the company or accept binding arbitration. In the US, the White House met with United Steelworkers officials to block a strike by 30,000 oil refinery and petrochemical workers and impose the dictates of the energy giants, which are profiteering from an explosive run-up in oil prices. The USW has since touted the deal as one which is “responsible” and “does not add to inflationary pressures.”

A torrent of propaganda has been released in the Western media presenting the war in Ukraine as a struggle for “democracy” and “freedom.” But contrary to these hypocritical claims, the democratic rights of workers in the United States and among its allies increasingly count for nothing. To the extent that workers carry out strikes and other struggles to raise their living standards, they will increasingly be blackguarded as “Putin’s Stooges” and a threat to the national interest, as striking London Tube workers have experienced recently.

The ruling elites confront an intractable social, economic and political crisis. Supply chains are increasingly tattered, a consequence of the disastrous response of the major capitalist countries to the pandemic, and, more recently, the reckless incitement of military conflict in Ukraine and unprecedented economic sanctions against Russia, which threaten to erupt into

open world war. At the same time, stock values remain both inflated near all-time highs and extremely fragile, with frenzied speculative investment fueled by the handout of virtually free money by the central banks since the pandemic began.

Under these conditions, the imposition of low wages and labor discipline is a vital necessity for the ruling class, which will deploy all the resources and methods of state repression at its disposal to secure them. In announcing that interest rates would rise last week, Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell pointed to the need to lower inflation to counter growing demands for higher wages, saying workers’ pay is “moving up in ways that are not consistent with 2 percent inflation over time,” adding, “We need to use our tools to guide inflation down to 2 percent.”

Workers all over the world increasingly find themselves in a political struggle against a ruling class that has nothing to offer the population but an unending pandemic, low wages, unbearably long hours, austerity and war. But the same underlying contradictions which are driving the ruling elites onto the disastrous path of war are enormously intensifying class tensions and radicalizing wide layers of the population. Over the last few years, growing numbers of workers have rebelled against the unions’ efforts to impose concessions, voting overwhelmingly to reject union-endorsed agreements at Warrior Met Coal, Volvo, Deere, Dana Corp., Frito-Lay, Kellogg’s and elsewhere in 2021 alone.

To break out of the isolation imposed by the pro-corporate trade unions on their struggles, workers require new organizations, rank-and-file factory and workplace committees, which base themselves on the methods of class struggle and an unrelenting fight for the needs of all workers. At the same time, the growing ruthlessness of the ruling class and its state demonstrates the need for workers to adopt a political perspective and program of their own, one which is dedicated to the mobilization of the working class internationally in the struggle for socialism and social equality, and against war.



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