

Teamsters union shuts down Canadian Pacific rail workers' struggle

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Do you work at CP Rail? Contact us to join the struggle to build a rank-and-file committee to take forward the fight for better wages and working conditions of railroaders across North America.

Update

Early Tuesday morning, the Teamsters union announced that it is shutting down the struggle of 3,000 Canadian Pacific Railway engineers, conductor and yard workers against a punishing and hazardous work regime, poverty-level pensions, and wage stagnation. The union has ordered workers at CP Rail operations across Canada to take down all picket lines and resume work as of Noon local time today.

Bowing to the demands of management, backed by the Trudeau government, the Teamsters Canada Rail Conference (TCRC) has agreed to submit all 24 major contract issues still in dispute to binding arbitration. In doing so, the union has ceded the workers' legal right to strike, work-to-rule or in any way fight for their demands. CP Rail workers' terms of employment will now be dictated by a government-appointed, pro-big business arbitrator. Consequently, none of the workers' grievances will be seriously addressed, let alone resolved.

Workers, however, cannot and will not give up their struggle against the brutal conditions of exploitation that CP Rail has imposed in pursuit of ever-greater profits and investor dividends. To mount a counter-offensive, as outlined in the following article published last night, workers must take the struggle into their own hands by building a rank-and-file committee in opposition to both management and the pro-company Teamsters.

The contract dispute between Canadian Pacific Railway and the 3,000 engineers, conductors and yard workers it employs at its operations across Canada has rapidly escalated into a class confrontation whose outcome will have a major impact on the class struggle throughout North America.

The workers, whom CP Rail locked out at 12:01 a.m. Sunday, are determined to put an end to a brutal work regimen that ravages their family lives and imperils their personal safety and that of the public. They are also fighting for improved wages and pensions after years of stagnating incomes and successive concessions contracts. Earlier this month, the workers voted by 96.7 percent in favour of strike action.

However, due to the sabotage by the Teamsters union, it was Canadian Pacific, Canada's second- and North America's sixth-largest railway, that took the offensive.

With its lockout, CP Rail is mobilizing big business and the political establishment on both sides of the Canada-US border to press the Justin Trudeau-led federal Liberal government to rush a back-to-work law through Parliament. Such a law would strip the rail workers of their rights to strike and bargain collectively and empower a government-appointed, pro-big business arbitrator to dictate their terms of employment.

On cue, Canada's largest business lobby groups, from the blue-chip Business Council of Canada and the Canadian Chamber of Commerce to the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, along with the premiers of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta, are imploring the government to

force the CP Rail workers back on the job. So too are numerous US business organizations and senators and governors from more than half a dozen Western and Plains states.

In demanding state intervention against the CP Rail workers, these forces are cynically invoking the impact of the shutdown of the railway's Canadian operations on supply chains and consequently consumer prices and workers' jobs. This is a fraud. As evidenced by the North American ruling class's ruinous pandemic policy, which has led to both mass death and socio-economic dislocation for working people, and its proxy war against Russia in Ukraine and the attendant blitzkrieg of economic sanctions, its concern is not the rational functioning of the economy, but the amassing of greater profits and advancement of its predatory imperialist interests on the world stage.

The Trudeau Liberal government has repeatedly illegalized or threatened to illegalize workers' job actions. Last April, it used an emergency law to break a strike by Port of Montreal longshore workers, and in December 2018 it criminalized a campaign of rotating strikes by postal workers.

Its preference, however, is to rely on the trade union bureaucracy, with which it enjoys a close partnership, to smother the CP Rail workers' struggle.

Labour Minister Seamus O'Regan claims the Liberal government wants a "negotiated deal." But the language he is using makes clear the negotiations, which continue under a federal mediator despite CP Rail locking out the workers and agitating for a back-to-work law, are a sham. Even as it publicly avows support for "negotiations," the government is readying a back-to-work law and threatening, behind closed doors, to strip rail workers of their rights, if it has not already issued an explicit ultimatum to the Teamster bureaucrats as to when a "deal" must be reached.

"We want a resolution, and we want it now," declared O'Regan on Sunday. "This work stoppage could not have happened at a worse time."

Rank-and-file CP Rail workers have taken the measure of the Trudeau government, which has spent the past two years blustering about being "pro-worker" while funneling unprecedented sums into the coffers of big business and the financial oligarchy and spearheading the ruling elite's "profit before lives" pandemic policy.

"I can guarantee Trudeau will force us back to work, without even thinking about the workers' lives," a CP Rail conductor told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "He will force us back regardless of our strike demands."

The CP Rail workers have powerful enemies arrayed against them. Yet still more powerful are their potential allies among the tens of millions of workers across North America who confront the same essential problems—deteriorating living standards, unsafe working conditions, austerity, speedup and war—born of the capitalist ruling elite's relentless drive to extract ever greater profits.

The past year has witnessed an ongoing wave of workers' struggles

across Canada and the US. Workers are seeking to resist a further erosion of their real wages as a result of surging inflation. They are determined to claw back pension cuts and other concessions, and are demanding protection from the pandemic. These struggles include strikes by Vale miners in Sudbury, Ontario; New Brunswick public-sector workers, Volvo Truck workers in Virginia; Kellogg's workers at multiple US plants; and the ongoing strike of 4,500 educators in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

In recent days, CP Rail workers in discussions with the WSWS have painted a harrowing picture of the punishing schedules and work rules the company imposes through a brutal disciplinary regime and its indifference to workers' safety.

"We are called the 'backbone of Canada,' but our industry just makes up its own rules," one worker told the WSWS.

Said another veteran rail worker, "They have effectively reduced the well-trained, hardworking men and women of CP into a position of folding under the constant pressure of fear of dismissal for speaking up when the actions requested of them would put either themselves, their fellow co-workers, or the public at elevated risk."

The working conditions faced by the CP Rail workers are akin to those of workers throughout basic industry and transport, across the gig economy and increasingly for professional workers in Canada and internationally. The ruling class' drive to keep schools open amid the COVID-19 pandemic, so that students' parents can be forced to keep churning out corporate profits, has demonstrated that it's as indifferent to the health and well-being of teachers and students as it is to that of railway workers and meatpackers.

Two factors account for the ruthlessness with which Canadian Pacific and the ruling class as a whole have responded to the rail workers' struggle. First, they see it as cutting across their plans—especially those of Canada's oil and agri-business companies and the railways that transport their merchandise—to profiteer from the war against Russia. Second and more fundamentally, they fear it will serve as a catalyst for a broader mobilization of the working class.

The greatest obstacle to CP Rail workers expanding their struggle and making it the spearhead of a working class counteroffensive is the Teamsters, and, more generally, the corporatist trade unions as a whole. For decades, the unions in Canada, as around the world, have systematically suppressed the class struggle while integrating themselves ever more fully into corporate management and the state.

Since negotiations between CP Rail and the Teamsters Canada Rail Conference (TCRC) began last September, the union has done everything in its power to demobilize the rank-and-file. This includes keeping workers in the dark about the negotiations.

As the lockout deadline approached, the TCRC bowed to CP Rail's demand that the 24 major outstanding issues in dispute be settled by binding arbitration. That is, it agreed to surrender the workers' right to strike or employ any other means of fighting for their just demands.

Then, according to TCRC spokesman Dave Fulton, management "moved the goal posts" and announced it would go ahead with the lockout unless the union allowed it to dictate terms that would ensure the arbitrator did its bidding across the board.

With the workers now locked out, the union has formally proclaimed a strike. But it has no intention of doing anything to rally working class support. This is underscored by the TCRC leaders' readiness to remain at the bargaining table even as CP Rail bays for a government back-to-work law, accuses workers of striking illegally, and vows, in the words of CEO Keith Creel, to explore "all avenues to address this egregious behaviour."

Workers' fundamental democratic rights, especially the right to strike, have been under increasing attack for decades. Rail workers, at both Canadian Pacific and Canadian National Rail, Canada's largest railway, have repeatedly been targeted, especially over the past 13 years.

Not only have the unions bowed to back-to-work laws and policed them;

terrified of the development of an insurgent working class movement, they have increasingly relied on the adoption or threat of these laws to provide a pretext for their short-circuiting of workers' struggles.

A special place in this political theater is reserved for the trade union-sponsored New Democratic Party (NDP). NDP provincial governments have themselves repeatedly adopted strikebreaking laws, but as a rule the social democrats condemn them in parliament while working with the union bureaucracy to corral workers back to work with claims that the "struggle must continue" in the capitalist courts and at the ballot box.

Yesterday, federal New Democratic Party (NDP) leader Jagmeet Singh announced his party would not back legislation stripping CP Rail workers of their right to strike and bargain collectively, saying that to do so at this time would be "cavalier." This is meaningless posturing of the worst kind. If and when the Liberals do introduce such a law, it will quickly pass thanks to the support of the official opposition Conservatives. Otherwise, the NDP will continue to prop up the minority Liberal government in parliament, as they have since 2019.

On Monday evening it was revealed that the NDP was about to sign a "supply and confidence" agreement with the Liberals, under which Canada's social democrats will pledge to keep the Trudeau government in power until 2025. This under conditions in which the Liberal government is playing a leading role in pressing the NATO powers to take an even more belligerent stance against Russia in the war over Ukraine, and is pivoting at home from "pandemic relief and stimulus" to austerity.

The CP Rail workers should follow the lead and join forces with the workers at BNSF, North America's largest railroad, who recently formed the BNSF Workers Rank-and-File Committee to mobilize workers in struggle against the company, independently of and in opposition to the pro-company unions.

Last week, the BNSF Workers Rank-and-File Committee issued a statement: "Support strike action at Canadian Pacific! For a united movement of North American railroaders against wage cuts and brutal working hours!" It called on workers at CP to form a rank-and-file committee of their own and link up with BNSF workers to "discuss a 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."

Like the CP Rail workers, the BNSF workers are facing state attack. The US courts have issued an injunction barring them from striking or taking any job action to oppose management's imposition of a punitive "Hi-Viz" attendance policy.

The big business line-up against the Canadian Pacific workers and the injunction against the BNSF workers underscore that workers are fighting not just a particularly reactionary employer, but rather the ruling class as a whole, its political representatives and the state. Consequently, they confront a political struggle.

Militant industrial action—including preparations to defy a back-to-work law—must be tied to the fight for a workers' government that would institute socialist policies in opposition to the ruling class agenda of unending pandemic, low wages, brutal working conditions, austerity and war.



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