

Teamsters union sabotages CP Rail workers struggle by agreeing to binding arbitration

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Are you a railroader at CP or another company? Contact us at cpworkersrjc@gmail.com to let us know what you think of the Teamsters' decision to sabotage the CP Rail struggle.

In the early hours of Tuesday morning, the Teamsters Canada Rail Conference (TCRC) abruptly announced an agreement with Canadian Pacific Railway (CP) to end the lockout of 3,000 engineers, conductors and yard workers and submit the contract dispute to binding arbitration. Workers had no say in this anti-democratic conspiracy, which will strip them of their legal rights to strike, take other job actions and collectively bargain for years to come. Within a matter of hours, all 3,000 workers were sent back to work.

The arbitrator is a government-appointed official who will review the positions of TCRC and CP representatives before imposing a final agreement on both parties. Statements from the company and Teamsters suggest that only some of the 24 outstanding contract issues will be addressed in the arbitration process. Workers will have no right to vote on the final agreement.

In a letter to its members, the Teamsters sought to provide a pathetic justification for their capitulation to CP management, which has waged a ferocious campaign of vilification against rail workers with the support of leading big business organizations. "In consideration of the hard positions of the parties at bargaining and the near certainty that our dispute would eventually end in a final and binding arbitration as ordered by the government ... our bargaining committee made the decision it would be in all of our best interests to take control of the situation and work out an agreement that gives us power over the terms, conditions and eventual arbitrator."

In other words, the Teamsters knew the big business Liberal government would impose an anti-democratic back-to-work law and a pro-employer settlement, so the bureaucrats decided to spare Trudeau's ministers their blushes and do their dirty work for them.

In the very next paragraph, the TCRC revealed that all the boasting about retaining "power" and "control" was a smokescreen aimed at concealing its prostration to the company's demands. The "major issues" to be put to the arbitrator would be "wages, benefits and pensions," the union wrote. CP's brutal scheduling and disciplinary regimes, which

rail workers have documented in extensive interviews with the WSWWS over recent days, will remain untouched.

Concluding the spectacle of complete surrender, the Teamsters' press release announcing the agreement concluded with the sentence, "There will be no comment from union spokespersons to the media until the arbitration process is complete."

In a sure sign that the company got everything from the arbitration agreement it wanted, CEO Keith Creel bullishly declared in a condescending letter to CP staff, "I am pleased that Teamsters Canada Rail Conference (TCRC) leadership has agreed to enter into binding arbitration with Canadian Pacific."

Creel continued that rail workers could now "support the North American economy and help to get Canadian resources to a world in need." Struggling to contain his enthusiasm, Creel bragged about the "exciting opportunities" in the year ahead, including the prospect that CP, through its acquisition of Kansas City Southern, would be "creating the first, and likely only ever, transnational railroad connecting three great democracies," Canada, the US and Mexico. There was no hint of irony in this statement from a man who had just stripped his company's workers of their democratic rights in order to resume the unrestrained accumulation of profits.

Rail workers speaking to the WSWWS responded with outrage to the agreement. "They're taking away the right to protest and strike, and here we are, back to work within a day," said a CP rail worker in British Columbia. "I highly doubt that the arbitrator is going to decide in favour of the employees. We're still not going to get what we want, and we've been fighting for two contracts. Members won't even get an opportunity to vote! For the union to just arbitrarily decide for the employees, to me it's not in the best interests of the collective group."

The decision for binding arbitration is in keeping with a deepening class war on working people being waged by the ruling elite in every country. In early February, railroaders at BNSF, America's largest railroad, were banned from taking strike action against the draconian "Hi Viz" attendance policy by a court injunction. Last week, P&O Ferries fired all 800 crew members on its passenger ships in Britain with immediate effect and replaced them with contract workers on a fraction of the regular wage.

Throughout the dispute, CP has acted with extreme belligerence. It filed a 72-hour lockout notice last Wednesday and immediately began implementing its “work stoppage contingency plan,” then sought to demonize rail workers for illegally striking after the lockout began. Company negotiators refused to agree to any adjustment to the pension cap, which has been in place for a decade and prevents workers from retiring on a livable pension. They also offered a meagre 2 percent pay “increase” in the first year and 2.5 percent thereafter under conditions where inflation in Canada is nearing 6 percent per year.

The company was supported by a savage campaign by business lobby groups, which made clear they would not tolerate strike action under conditions where high commodity prices for oil and agricultural goods, including fertilizer, promised to bring bumper profits for shareholders. The Trudeau Liberal government joined in, with Labour Minister Seamus O’Regan declaring threateningly Sunday, “We want a resolution, and we want it now.”

There are two central reasons for the ruling elite’s unprecedented degree of aggressiveness. Firstly, Canadian big business sees an opportunity to cash in big time on the high prices for oil and fertilizer produced by the sweeping sanctions imposed on Russia by the Western imperialist powers after Moscow was goaded into invading Ukraine by US and Canadian provocations. While the inflation produced by these policies, exacerbated by the pandemic’s disruption of supply chains, brings massive windfalls to oil producers and investors, it is having devastating consequences on workers’ living standards across Canada and internationally.

Secondly and even more fundamentally, the ruling elite fears that due to the mounting social and economic crisis, a determined struggle by rail workers could trigger a broader explosion of working class anger against the rampant profiteering and utter disregard for workers’ lives during the pandemic. The union bureaucracy, which has systematically suppressed workers’ struggles for the past four decades, was equally terrified, which explains the Teamsters’ abject surrender to Creel and CP’s shareholders.

This capitulation was the logical outcome of the TCRC’s policy throughout of blocking any collective opposition from rail workers to CP’s bone-crushing working conditions. TCRC negotiators kept workers in the dark about what was happening at the bargaining table and refused to issue a strike notice despite an overwhelming 96.7 percent vote in favour of a work stoppage. The union’s actions allowed CP to take the offensive, announcing the lockout and unleashing its vicious campaign against the workers. To save face, the Teamsters belatedly issued a strike notice 24 hours after the lockout notice was filed.

It is no mere coincidence that the Teamsters’ decision to sabotage the CP struggle came just hours after New Democratic Party leader Jagmeet Singh confirmed his party would enter a

formal alliance with the Liberal government to prop it up until 2025. Singh’s decision will give Trudeau a free hand to pivot to “post-pandemic” austerity for workers to pay for a massive increase in military spending as part of Canadian imperialism’s reckless drive to war with Russia. It also means that the trade unions, which are traditionally aligned with the NDP, are effectively part of this pro-austerity, pro-war government. The Teamsters’ actions early Tuesday underscore that the union bureaucracy’s role in this unholy alliance will be to discipline the working class into submission.

This lineup of political forces underscores that CP rail workers do not just confront a particularly ruthless employer but the class war agenda of Canada’s entire ruling elite. If they are to resist CP’s punishing work regime, draconian disciplinary procedures, the robbing of their pensions, and wage stagnation, they must take up a political struggle against the domination of social life by a tiny financial oligarchy and its lackeys in the NDP and trade unions.

The task of forming an independent rank-and-file committee at CP Railway is therefore posed with renewed urgency. This committee should fight for what workers need to guarantee a safe working environment, including a rest period of at least 24 hours between shifts, the linking of wage increases to CP Railway’s annual price hikes for freight cargo, the abolition of the pension cap, and the restitution of the contributions the company has illegitimately withheld from the pension fund since 2012.

Above all, the CP Railway workers rank-and-file committee must fight to broaden the struggle for decent pay and safe working conditions to other sections of the working class, including other transportation workers, energy workers, public sector employees and industrial workers. If you agree and wish to join this struggle, email cpworkersrfc@gmail.com.



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