

Striking signalmen at Toronto's Union Station must broaden their struggle to avoid a union-imposed sellout

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1 May 2022

Are you a rail worker? Contact us to speak out join the struggle to build a rank-and-file committee to take forward the fight of railroaders across North America for better wages and working conditions.

Ninety-six signal operators and equipment technicians have been on strike since April 20 at Toronto's Union Station. The strike was launched some seven months after the workers decisively rejected a sell-out tentative agreement endorsed by the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW). Employees of Toronto Terminals Railway (TTR), the striking workers are responsible for train control, signals and communications maintenance at the city's main rail hub.

The Union Station Rail Corridor is 6.4km long and consists of a complex network of approach tracks, passenger platforms and four control towers. It has 14 station tracks with platform access, and more than 180 signals, 250 switch machines, and 40km of circuited track. More than 300 commuter trains a day traverse the corridor.

Workers have been without a contract since December 2019. In September 2021, they voted down a proposed five-year contract recommended by the IBEW leadership and Toronto Terminals Railway management. Wages are the key issue in the dispute, under conditions where annual inflation is approaching 7 percent. In addition, strikers say that their benefits package has been frozen since 2015, even though the cost-of-living has spiralled upward over the past seven years.

The claim that there is no money to fund above-inflation pay and benefit increases for the workers is a flat-out lie. Toronto Terminals Railway is jointly owned by Canadian National Rail (CN) and Canadian Pacific Railway (CP), giant corporations which for years have been engaged in a relentless drive to maximize profits at practically any cost to workers and their safety. Both railroads have experienced bumper profits during the pandemic, with CP Rail Chief Executive Officer Keith Creel, notorious for his indifference to the horrendous working conditions employees confront, pocketing the outrageous sum of \$26 million in compensation during 2021.

As one striker explained to the *World Socialist Web Site*, "The issue with our company is it's jointly owned by Canadian

Pacific and Canadian National railways. So, 50 percent of the profits go to CP and 50 percent goes to CN.

"We don't keep any of the profits for ourselves. We cover operating costs, and the rest goes to the parent company. In terms of negotiations, we have to negotiate with all three entities. In addition to our company, representing CP and CN, we also have to negotiate with Metrolinx because they have to pay our wages. Metrolinx owns all the rail and infrastructure around here."

Another striker added, "CN just released their earnings for their quarter, and they made \$3.71 billion. They keep increasing dividends to shareholders, so they're able to pay. They're making close to record profits and they're giving big bonuses to the top executives."

A third agreed, commenting, "They're saying 'COVID hurt us,' but look at their profits! It doesn't look like it hurt them at all."

The strike is being intentionally isolated by the IBEW. The union has no intention of mounting a serious struggle, which would require mobilizing support from other railway and Toronto area workers. Instead, it is aiming to ground down workers' resolve by making them subsist on meager strike benefits until it can impose virtually the same pro-company contract with a few cosmetic changes.

Unifor, which represents track workers at Union Station and thousands of railway workers across the country, is openly sabotaging the strike. It is effectively overseeing a scabbing operation, allowing TTR management to redeploy Unifor members to cover the strikers' jobs.

The isolation of the strikers has made their picket lines all but meaningless. The workers are not legally permitted to stop contractors working on the Union Station "revitalization project" from crossing their picket lines for more than a few minutes, or at most an hour or two. Strikers reported to the WSWs that while Metrolinx's operations suffered some disruption during the first days of the job action, this is no longer the case.

Strikers explained that track worker workforce is more transient, due to the back-breaking nature of the labour they

perform. Unifor exploited this fact to ram through a sellout contract covering the track workers last September. It included a 12.5 percent wage “increase” over 5 years, which averages out to a mere 2.5 percent per year. With the complicity of the IBEW, TTR than tried to make the agreement with Unifor the “pattern” for all its employees.

In addition to workers represented by Unifor, TTR management and others from outside the company have been filling in for the strikers. In a scene emblematic of the cozy relationship between the trade unions and corporations, one of the TTR management scabs was identified as a former union local president. He drove away from the site to shouts of “Shame on you!”

The use of unqualified scabs and replacements presents an especially dangerous situation in the busiest transportation hub in the country’s largest city. As a striking worker pointed out, “All our jobs are very safety critical. We respond to trouble, so any issue where they’re trying to line up a train and it’s not working as intended, they call us, so we help prevent any delays. If there are any switch issues, we try to get these delays mitigated. We also have scheduled maintenance that maintains the safety and integrity of the equipment.

“In the two weeks before we went on strike, TTR had us do all the yearly preventive maintenance. They wanted us coming in for overtime to prepare for the strike. They said they were ‘introducing’ a pilot project to improve maintenance.”

Accidents, derailments and even fatalities are common at both TTR’s parent companies, CP Rail and CN.

In December 1999, a CN train carrying petroleum products collided with a derailed freight train travelling in the opposite direction south of Montreal, Quebec. The freight train had derailed at a broken rail caused by a defective weld that was not promptly addressed, despite problems being repeatedly reported by train crews. The two-man crew of the freight train was killed, but they received the hollow honour of having new stations named after them (Davis and Thériault).

In May 2003, two men were killed on another CN freight train when a trestle collapsed on a bridge near McBride, British Columbia. The crew had been disciplined for refusing to cross the bridge on a previous run due to safety concerns. It was later revealed that several components of the bridge had been reported as rotten as far back as 1999, but no repairs were ever ordered.

As for CP, the *World Socialist Web Site* has extensively covered the fatal Field, British Columbia derailment of February 2019, which killed three crew members. Their train derailed and crashed into a ravine after its air brakes failed in cold weather on a notoriously steep grade. Pointing to the underlying causes of the tragedy, the WSWS wrote:

“The events leading up to the Field derailment provide a devastating indictment of what is known in the industry as precision-scheduled railroading (PSR). Summing up this corporate policy, which has been adopted at railroads across

North America, a CP Rail worker said of PSR in a recent interview with the WSWS, ‘The basic idea is that they expect the most amount of work with the least human resources possible’.”

To win their struggle, striking TTR signal operators and equipment technicians should follow the example of their colleagues at CP Rail, who recently established the CP Rail workers Rank-and-File Committee to seize control of their struggle for improved wages, benefits, and safety protections from the Teamsters union. Like the unions at TTR, the Teamsters have worked hand-in-glove with the rail corporations to boost profits and attack workers’ conditions. Although CP Rail workers had voted overwhelmingly in early March for a strike, the Teamsters allowed the company to take the initiative and lock them out. Then two days later it agreed to binding arbitration, which allows a government-appointed official to dictate the workers’ employment terms and robs them of their rights to strike and bargain collectively for years to come.

The first task of a rank-and-file committee of TTR strikers would be to break out of the isolation imposed by the unions. Appeals should be made to track workers represented by Unifor to join the struggle, alongside rail workers across the freight and passenger train networks in Canada, who all confront the same grueling working conditions. The committee should advance demands based on what workers actually need, not what corporate management claims is “affordable.” This should include an immediate 30 percent pay increase to make up for the years of concessions, and above-inflation raises for pay and benefits going forward.

Above all, strikers must make their struggle the spearhead of a mass mobilization of the working class to counter the ruling elite’s class-war agenda of austerity and attacks on workers’ living standards. This requires the waging of a political struggle to break the grip of the financial oligarchy over all aspects of social and political life, and secure decent-paying, secure jobs for all.



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