

# Strike by Toronto Union Station signal operators sabotaged by IBEW union

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*Are you a rail worker at Union Station, CP Rail, or Canadian National Railways? Contact the CP Workers Rank-and-File Committee to share your views on the latest union sellout and to take up a struggle for improved wages, pensions and working conditions on the railroads.*

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The strike by 95 signal operators and equipment technicians at Toronto's Union Station was abruptly shut down Tuesday by the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW). Capitulating to management's strikebreaking operations, the IBEW agreed to send all outstanding issues to binding arbitration, robbing the workers of any right to vote on their future terms of employment or carry out collective job action for years hence.

The striking workers—employed by private operator Toronto Terminals Railway (TTR)—are responsible for train control, signals and communications maintenance at the city's main rail hub. Prior to the launch of the strike on April 20, they had been working without a contract since December 2019. The workers decisively repudiated an IBEW-backed sellout deal last fall. This was no doubt a major factor in the union bureaucrats' decision to dispense with any democratic vote this time around, and their readiness to allow a government-appointed arbitrator to determine the workers' terms of employment.

While the employer fought the strike tooth-and-nail with all the resources at its disposal, the striking signals workers were forced by the IBEW to enter the struggle gagged and with their hands bound behind their backs. A massive strikebreaking operation was launched from the very moment the workers walked out, with police on hand to ensure contractors, managers, and redeployed workers could cross picket lines. Unifor, which represents track workers at Union Station and thousands of rail workers across the country, oversaw a huge scabbing operation as it permitted track workers to be employed by TTR as

signal operators and technicians throughout the strike.

On Monday, Metrolinx, the provincial agency which manages the network of bus and train lines in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), filed an injunction against the strike “to prevent more service disruptions.” The following day, TTR, owned jointly by Canadian National and Canadian Pacific Railways, announced that a “tentative agreement” had been reached with the IBEW that would submit all outstanding issues to binding arbitration. Workers were forced back on the job that evening.

The Union Station strike once again underscores the treacherous role of the unions, which over the past four decades have been transformed into an industrial police for big business. The IBEW purposely kept the strike at Toronto Union Station isolated from other workers in the Toronto area, rendering their picket lines virtually meaningless. Unifor and the IBEW ensured that negotiations for track workers and signal operators were kept separated, then rejected any appeal during the strike to unify their struggle. Well aware that a powerful appeal by the rail workers for a mass worker-led struggle for wage and benefit increases under conditions of rampant inflation would have been met with enthusiasm in the GTA—where over 15,000 construction workers launched a strike over these very same issues last Monday—and across Canada both unions adamantly opposed expanding the strike beyond Union Station.

The IBEW's endorsement of binding arbitration follows a series of similar actions by trade unions to sabotage workers' struggles. In mid-March, a potential strike by 16,000 faculty at Ontario's 24 public colleges was prevented after the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) colluded with the government-mandated College Employer Council (CEC) to send all outstanding issues to binding interest arbitration.

Determined to avoid a political struggle with the Ford government in the run up to the provincial election this

June, OPSEU pushed for binding interest arbitration with the understanding that key issues around workload and protections for contract staff would not be addressed. This was already made clear by a government-appointed mediator, who arrogantly asserted last October when the contract expired that the union proposals were “highly aspirational and completely unrealistic.”

In late March, the Teamsters Canada Rail Conference (TCRC) abruptly announced an agreement with Canadian Pacific Railway (CP) to send all issues in their contract dispute to binding arbitration. The agreement brought to an end a lockout of 3,000 conductors, engineers, and yard workers, and underscored the TCRC’s contempt for the membership who had voted 97 percent vote in favour of strike action just weeks earlier.

Workers will have no right to vote on the final agreement, which will strip them of their legal rights to strike, collectively bargain, or take other job actions for years to come.

The final terms of the arbitration of the Union Station contract dispute have yet to be determined. But workers’ key grievances will not be addressed.

The “outstanding issues” include workers’ demands for wage and benefits hikes to offset years of stagnation and now spiralling inflation.

TTR is determined to impose a contract on the signal workers patterned after that Unifor prevailed on the track workers to accept last September. It included a 12.5 percent wage “increase” over 5 years, which averages out to a mere 2.5 percent per year, under conditions where inflation is currently rising at an annual rate of 6.7 percent.

The IBEW’s imposition of binding arbitration means workers will be legally banned from staging any job action until the arbitrator-dictated five-year contract expires.

Such anti-democratic, pseudo-legal processes, implemented behind workers’ backs, are in keeping with the class war that the ruling elite in every country is waging on working people. 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. The union did not challenge the ruling. Instead, it rushed the dispute to an arbitrator chosen by the National Mediation Board (NMB), a US government agency with a long record of imposing the dictates of big business and blocking strikes by railroad and airline workers.

The sellout of these recent strikes by the unions through

the acceptance of pro-corporate arbitration procedures underscores the political dead end of the pro-employer “labour” organizations and the “legal” framework they defer to and enforce. Workers at Toronto Terminals Railway must reject the authority of the corporatist trade unions and established political parties, who have every intention of imposing on them essentially the same concessions-filled contract they rejected seven months ago.

Workers must form their own organization of struggle to advance demands based on what workers actually need, not what corporate management and government officials claim is “realistic.” CP and CN have seen a meteoric rise in profits during the pandemic, with CP CEO Keith Creel amassing almost \$27 million in personal compensation last year alone. This wealth, accrued on the basis of brutal class exploitation and the suppression of workers wages and benefits, must be expropriated and deployed to guarantee decent-paying, secure jobs for all.

Workers at TTR should link up their struggle with that of the CP Rail Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which was founded in late March in opposition to the corporatist unions’ betrayal of rail workers. The CP Workers Rank-and-File Committee fights to mobilize railroaders throughout North America to put an end to the dictatorship that the profit-hungry corporations, and their lackeys in government and the trade unions, exercise over all aspects of workers’ lives through brutal work regimens and arbitrary disciplinary procedures. These struggles must expand beyond the railways to workers in other industries across Canada and internationally who suffer under the same exploitative conditions, and become a global working class counter-offensive fighting for an anti-capitalist, socialist program.



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