

750 signal and communication workers in Canada strike CN Rail for pay hikes and improved conditions

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Around 750 workers went on strike Saturday at Canada's largest railway operator, Canadian National Railway, after contract talks reached an impasse. The strikers, members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), work in signals and communications at CN Rail operations across Canada.

Their struggle is part of the growing upsurge of the working class across Canada and internationally, fueled by untenable rises in the cost of living due to soaring food, energy and housing prices. Rail workers and other sections of the working class are coming into direct conflict with a ruthless ruling class determined to make workers pay for the social crisis accelerated by the still raging COVID-19 pandemic and the US-instigated war against Russia.

The goal of governments and corporations everywhere is to turn back the clock to the slave labour conditions of the 19th century by sacrificing workers' well-being, health and safety to the grotesque accumulation of profit.

The CN signal and communications workers are demanding wages in line with other railway trades, compensation for travel time and time worked, two-day weekends and a better work-life balance. Another key issue is "out-of-region work," where workers are sent from their home region for weeks at a time away from their families and friends. This issue was not addressed during the previous contract negotiations, which resulted in a five-year sellout deal that expired at the end of 2021.

The company has offered a pathetic pay "increase" of 2.67 percent per year over the next three years, not even half the current rate of inflation in Canada (6.8 percent).

A large percentage of the striking workers are on-call employees who are deployed in the aftermath of critical events that affect railway operations, such as fires and floods. They also respond to railway emergencies, including derailments involving dangerous chemicals. Others do preventive maintenance, such as maintaining railway crossings, to ensure public safety.

CN issued an arrogant statement Monday stating that it is "prepared" and "ready" to implement an operational

contingency plan that includes the use of managers and contract workers to apparently ensure a normal level of operations "as long as required." In other words, they are planning a massive strikebreaking operation with reduced crews—one, moreover, which is receiving the full support of the Teamsters union and is forcing conductors and engineers to cross picket lines.

The company's scabbing operation is a potential disaster in the making for workers and the general public. CN is a multinational rail network transporting more than 300 million tons of commodities, including oil and other flammable liquids and deadly chemicals, across 18,600 miles of track throughout North America every year. Lack of maintenance and inadequate staff training have contributed to a surge in derailments and other accidents over recent years, some of them fatal. These factors were cited as contributing to the deadly Canadian Pacific Railway Field Hill derailment in 2019 that killed the three crew members on board.

CN Rail will not tolerate any disruption in its profit-making, even if it endangers the lives of its employees and the population at large. Already its stock is down 9 percent over last year due to disruptions in the supply chain. CN Chief Operating Officer Rob Reilly responded to the strike in an open letter to employees on Monday with the bald-faced lie, "We have met or exceeded every one of the union's demands in an effort to reach an agreement prior to the strike deadline."

The company is demanding that the IBEW surrender workers' rights to strike and bargain collectively by agreeing that all "remaining differences" be resolved through binding arbitration. Under this anti-democratic procedure, a pro-employer official appointed by the government will impose contract terms on both parties.

IBEW negotiator Steve Martin rejected the company's claim to have made a fair offer. He cited the company's pledge to boost daily allowances, which would see meal per diems rise by \$3.50 in the first year but only \$1 per day in each of the next two years. "So you hope there's no more increases in inflation in years two and three," he said.

Martin's posturing as an opponent of the company reflects the fear in the IBEW bureaucracy that the anger among strikers

could quickly escape their control. Behind the scenes, the union is doing all it can to facilitate a betrayal of the workers. The union has already indicated its readiness to settle the dispute through binding arbitration, with Martin stating, “If necessary, it is a tool that’s available that we’ll consider in due course.”

In recent months binding arbitration has become the unions’ preferred mechanism for shutting down strike actions and imposing concessions-filled contracts that give the bosses everything they want. In March, the day after Canada’s other major railway, CP Rail, had locked out 3,000 workers who had voted overwhelmingly to strike, the Teamsters union kowtowed to the company’s demand, backed by the Trudeau Liberal government, for binding arbitration and ordered workers to return to work the next day without any vote. In fact, eight of the nine last contract disputes at CP Rail have been sent to pro-corporate arbitrators, who have imposed one concessionary contract after another that met none of the workers’ key demands.

In May, a 7-day strike by 95 signal operators and equipment technicians at Toronto’s Union Station was abruptly shut down when the IBEW capitulated to management’s strikebreaking operations and agreed to send all outstanding issues to binding arbitration. This disgraceful betrayal robbed the workers of any right to vote on their future terms of employment or carry out collective job action for years to come.

In 2019, the Teamsters union shut down a strike by 3,200 CN workers after reaching a tentative agreement that workers only learned the details of several weeks later. The rotten deal abandoned most if not all of workers’ key demands. The premature shutdown of the strike by the union relieved the trade union-backed federal Liberal government of having to impose back-to-work legislation that would have exposed the rigged “collective bargaining system” and the Trudeau government’s reactionary anti-worker agenda.

The increasingly frequent and explosive struggles by rail workers are part of an international process. As CN Rail signal and communication workers walk the picket lines across Canada, a national rail strike in the UK involving more than 50,000 workers, the biggest in a generation, began today. Much like the treacherous role played by the IBEW and Teamsters in Canada, the British unions, led by the RMT union, did all it could to sabotage the strike before it began, including begging for talks with the anti-worker Tory government of Boris Johnson.

In the United States, contract talks involving 140,000 railroad workers are underway. The talks have continued after the rail unions capitulated to an anti-democratic court injunction banning a strike at BNSF against the draconian “Hi-Viz” attendance policy. The IBEW, through its participation in the Coordinated Bargaining Coalition of unions, is pleading with the Biden administration to intervene to settle the dispute. Such an intervention, by a government focused on waging war against Russia and making working people pay for the capitalist

crisis through austerity and inflation-enforced wage cuts, could produce nothing but a devastating defeat for rail workers.

Rail workers are clearly ready to fight the corporate/government/union dictatorship that prevails on North America’s railways. The only viable starting point for a genuine struggle for improvements in working conditions—including wage and benefit increases, improvements to the work-life balance and guaranteed health and safety provisions—is the building of a rank-and-file strike committee controlled by the workers themselves to wage a political struggle against the prioritization of corporate profit over worker safety. This committee must seize control of the strike from the IBEW bureaucracy, advance demands based on what workers actually need, not what the company claims it can afford, and mobilize all workers at CN and across the rail industry in support of the signal and communication workers’ fight.

The CP Workers Rank-and-File Committee was founded in March to resist the betrayal of CP workers’ struggle for an end to brutal scheduling and improvements to wages and safety on the job. Workers striking at CN Rail should follow the lead of their brothers and sisters at CP Rail by forming their own rank-and-file committee to unify their struggle with other sections of workers internationally, who all confront ruthless attacks on their living standards and working conditions.

Above all, striking CN Rail workers must recognize that they cannot take a single step forward unless their struggle rejects all forms of Canadian nationalism and seeks to build a North America-wide mass movement of all rail workers to put an end to the corporate domination of the railroads.

These struggles must be guided by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) which provides the political leadership and organizational framework to organize a worker-led counteroffensive on a global scale based on an anti-capitalist, socialist program.



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