

Canadian rail workers express support for British rail strike

Our reporters
22 June 2022

Rail workers across Canada are closely following the strike by 50,000 rail workers in Britain, which is developing into an open political confrontation with the Conservative government and the entire ruling elite. The strikers, who walked off the job for a day Tuesday and will do so again June 23, are being demonized by the Tory government and Labour Party opposition for demanding a living wage and decent working conditions.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who has led the way among the European powers in funnelling vast amounts of weaponry to Ukraine to fuel the US-NATO war with Russia, has made clear his government's determination to slash thousands of jobs, gut terms and conditions, and cut wages. Working people increasingly recognize that the ruling elite's onslaught on rail workers is merely the beginning of a planned assault on the wages and conditions of all workers to foot the bill for war abroad and the enrichment of the financial oligarchy at home. As one striking British rail worker told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "The government want to walk all over everybody. I think it needs a general strike. It's been so obvious for a while now because it's an attack on the working class. The rich are getting richer and there has never been so many millionaires and billionaires. It's scandalous."

Canadian rail workers know from first-hand experience the desperate conditions facing their British colleagues. Around 750 signals and communications workers at CN Rail have been on strike since Saturday to demand pay increases and improvements to work schedules. They are fighting a scheduling regime that sees them sent for weeks at a time to different regions away from their families.

A series of determined strikes in Canada for improved working conditions, an end to brutal

scheduling regimes, and wage increases have been sold out over recent years through the combined efforts of the trade unions and threats of government intervention to criminalize job action.

In 2019, the Teamsters sabotaged a strike at CN Rail by bullying workers into accepting a concessions-filled contract whose terms they only learned weeks after returning to work. Earlier this year, the Teamsters ignored an overwhelming strike vote at CP Rail, allowing the company to lock out 3,000 conductors and engineers. The Teamsters then accepted binding arbitration to settle the dispute, an anti-democratic process that involves a government-appointed official imposing employment terms on the workers, who have no right to vote on or take collective action against them.

The repeated betrayals of rail workers' struggles by the unions and the refusal of successive federal governments to regulate the highly profitable rail corporations have contributed to dangerous conditions on the railways. On Monday, a CN Rail train carrying potash derailed near Thunder Bay, Ontario. Derailments—some of them deadly—have become a routine event across Canada's rail network. In February 2019, three rail workers lost their lives when a train derailed on a notoriously dangerous stretch of track near Field, British Columbia, in bitterly cold temperatures.

In response to the Teamsters' latest betrayal, CP Rail workers set up the CP Workers Rank-and-file Committee independently of the trade unions to unify rail workers' struggles across Canada and North America for improved terms and conditions. As the Committee's founding statement declared, "The struggle at CP Rail is a key battleground for workers across Canada, the United States and internationally.

As the ruling elites prepare to plunge the world into a catastrophic war potentially fought with nuclear weapons, they cannot tolerate any dissent by workers at home. The arbitration deal that CP, the Teamsters and Trudeau government are trying to impose on us will rob us of any right to strike, perform work-to-rule or bargain for improvements for years to come. If they succeed, similar draconian methods will be employed against working people everywhere.”

The WSWs has received statements of solidarity for the British rail strike from members of the CP Workers Rank-and-File Committee.

Paul, an engineer and former union rep, recalled how rail workers were “placated, referenced as champions, heroes and the like” during the pandemic. “This struggle, our struggle is continuous and obvious to anyone who cares to look,” he continued. “Moreover, the place to look from is the kitchen tables of working people. To sit anywhere else is to not even be able to see the problems in their full breadth. This vantage point, this position, the lives of most of us lead are opaque to those in positions of power that set our tables. What is worse, they do not even want to sit with us...and some think there is not a class struggle.

“As a Union representative in Canada, it soon became obvious that my main function was to remind management that my members were actual people, not a commodity, a number, not a verb but a noun.”

Paul referred to a remark by the great American socialist Eugene Debs as summing up what the British rail strike is about: “I am opposing a social order in which it is possible for one man who does absolutely nothing that is useful to amass a fortune of hundreds of millions of dollars, while millions of men and women who work all the days of their lives secure barely enough for a wretched existence.”

Paul concluded his message by saying, “From my home to theirs, I stand with the working people in Britain and with the Railway Workers specifically at this time... in solidarity.”

Mark, an engineer from Alberta, sent the following statement in support of the strike:

“I was born in Britain in the mid 1960s, a working class scion of miners, nurses, and railwaymen—in other words, at Ground Zero of the labour struggle that would continue through my lifetime and, no doubt, beyond. My father, grandfather, and great grandfathers

drove trains through war and peace, dug coal, and died young. Our women, for generations, healed the sick. Hailed as heroes when expedient, slated as villains when all sought fair recompense and appreciation for their labours, my family bore the brunt of a unilateral war of attrition against the most necessary sectors of industrial labour. I left Britain thirty years ago for Canada and, ironically enough, became a railwayman.

“Even in this vast land of wealth and privilege, the labour struggles continue unabated. We Canadian railroaders suffer the same ignominy as our brothers and sisters across the world foisted on us by the reptilian mind of capitalism, its arch protagonists another species of human from us to all intents and purposes. We tarry in an environment where profits and executive remuneration spiral out of control and where labour standards and safety descend equally as quickly.

“We Canadian railroaders stand with our brethren in Britain and beyond, aggrieved by the craven excesses of our employers, yet buoyed by our solidarity. Your struggle in Britain is identical to ours in Canada, both products of a common source of imperialist thinking, wealth, and class disparity. As a result, we must stand together, not out of unseemly avarice, but out of dignity and pride. Few share our dedication; fewer enjoy the pride we eke from the grave responsibilities we shoulder with ease and grace. We ask for nothing more than fairness and equanimity; instead, we receive vile contempt.

“Strike because that is your last option in a situation without many. Carry the day, be resilient, be respectful, show them the professionalism we are known for. Win for you, win for us, be an example to workers everywhere. Show how we deserve a life of labour reciprocated by respecting the sanctity of our existences and role in society. We are worth more; we demand nothing less.”



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact