

International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers sells out Canadian National Railway signal and communications strike

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Are you a railroader at CN or another company? Contact the CP Workers Rank-and-File Committee at cpworkersrfc@gmail.com to let us know what you think of the IBEW's decision to sabotage the CN signal and communication workers' struggle.

The two-week strike by 750 signal and communication workers at Canadian National (CN) Railways was unceremoniously sabotaged by the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) this week.

The union forced workers to return to work on Wednesday, July 6, without giving them any say in its decision—announced by CN Rail management Monday—to have all the outstanding issues in the workers' contract dispute resolved through anti-democratic, pro-corporate binding arbitration.

In recent months, binding arbitration has become the weapon of choice wielded by the Canadian ruling class, determined to make workers pay for the economic crisis and spiralling cost of living brought on by its disastrous response to the pandemic and the escalating US-instigated war against Russia in Ukraine. In addition to wages, the arbitrator will decide, among other things, on the company's demand for further concessions in the form of a lifetime cap on some health benefits.

The IBEW's betrayal was so craven that it left it to the company to announce the arbitration deal, not even bothering to initially issue a public statement on the matter. IBEW spokesman Steve Martin subsequently gave an interview to Global News in which he confirmed that the decision to scuttle the strike was “a collective decision by the negotiating committee.”

The arbitrator will either be a federal Labour Department official or a “labour relations specialist” chosen by mutual agreement between the union and company, or failing that, the government. In any event, he or she will be committed to the subordination of workers' interests to big business profit and investor returns.

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, floods and derailments involving dangerous chemicals. They have been

demanding wages in line with other railway trades, compensation for travel time and time worked, two-day weekends and a better work-life balance.

Until the beginning of the strike on June 18, the workers had laboured without a contract since October 2021. CN and the IBEW used the intervening months for “negotiations” to hammer out a contract that they intended to impose on workers. CN Chief Operating Officer Rob Reilly responded to the strike in an open letter to employees 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.”

In reality, CN sought to impose an agreement that would have included savage real-terms pay cuts. The company touted a wage “increase” of 10 percent over three years, which would have fallen well short of the current annual inflation rate of close to 8 percent. But even the inadequate 10 percent figure was a lie, with IBEW Local 2052 President Chris Nadon telling CTV News that CN actually offered an 8 percent wage increase and the one-time equivalent of a 2 percent pay rise in signing bonuses. Such bonuses do not impact benefits or pension entitlements. The IBEW chose not to put management's offer to a vote, no doubt recognizing that the workers would overwhelmingly repudiate it.

CN responded on June 29 with the vindictive decision to remove a pledge to make the pay increase retroactive to January 2022, saying that any “increase” would now start on the same day as the new collective agreement.

The IBEW has made clear that it is a loyal partner in imposing CN's anti-worker agenda. For close to nine months following the contract's expiry in October, the union refused to call strike action. This strategy gave the company ample time to prepare its “contingency plan,” which forced inexperienced managers and contract workers to work as scabs throughout the strike. This strikebreaking operation allowed CN to continue “normal” operations. With its refusal to appeal to other CN Rail workers to join the struggle—including 3,000 conductors, trainpersons and yard workers who are members of the Teamsters—the IBEW facilitated management's strikebreaking operation, emboldened it to behave so provocatively in the

negotiations, and endangered the safety of workers and the general public.

The IBEW signalled to CN from the beginning of the strike that it was ready and willing to agree to binding arbitration. IBEW negotiator Steve Martin commented June 20, “If necessary, it is a tool that’s available that we’ll consider in due course.” In other words, Martin and the IBEW bureaucracy understood that immediately imposing binding arbitration could have triggered an explosion among militant workers. It therefore thought it best to let workers blow off some steam on the picket lines for a week or two, before agreeing to cede workers’ legal right to strike and bargain collectively.

In agreeing to binding arbitration and shutting down the strike, Martin made the vague assertion that given the current state of the strike, “(I)t was the most reasonable thing to do.” What does this blather really mean? That it is “reasonable” for CN to continue its unchallenged profiteering racket at the expense of workers’ health and well-being? Or that it is not “reasonable” for signals and communications workers to wage a unified struggle with conductors, engineers, and all other job classifications for decent-paying, secure jobs for all?

For Martin and his fellow IBEW bureaucrats, ensconced in their comfortable offices with six-figure salaries, the desire to maintain cordial relations with their corporate and state “partners” through binding arbitration is a far more “reasonable” option. This anti-democratic procedure, whereby a government-appointed official reviews the positions of IBEW and CN representatives before imposing a final agreement on both parties, excludes the workers from having any say in their future terms of employment. Workers will have no right to vote on the final agreement, let alone carry out collective action to improve their working conditions for years to come.

This undemocratic process has become the preferred method used by the trade unions, from the railways to the public sector, to prevent or shut down strikes and foist concessions-filled contracts onto the backs of workers. When CP Rail locked out 3,000 conductors and engineers in March after they voted overwhelmingly to strike, the Teamsters union bowed to the company’s demand for binding arbitration, backed by the Trudeau Liberal government, and ordered workers to return to work the next day without any vote. Eight of the last nine 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 seven-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.

Rail workers are clearly ready to fight the corporate/government/union dictatorship that prevails on North America’s railroads. In the US, around 140,000 railroad workers at all seven Class I major railroads, including CN and

CP Rail, are voting on a national strike.

On the wider international stage, French National Railways (SNCF) workers struck on July 6-7 to demand wage increases indexed to inflation, as broad sections of workers in Europe go out on strike against rising living costs. This comes on the heels of the biggest national strike in a generation by British rail workers.

Much like the treacherous role played by the IBEW and Teamsters in Canada, the British unions, led by the RMT union, did all they could to sabotage the strike before it began, including by begging for talks with the anti-worker Tory government of Boris Johnson. Leading Tory MPs denounced rail workers as “Putin’s stooges,” while the government responded with plans for repressive legislation to mobilise scabs and ban strikes in essential services.

What these recent struggles underline is that the only viable starting point for a genuine fight 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 rank-and-file committees, controlled by the workers themselves, fighting in a broader political struggle against the prioritization of corporate profit over workers’ well-being and safety.

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. CP Rail workers explicitly repudiated the Teamsters’ acceptance of binding arbitration, and vowed to build a “common struggle against the rampant profiteering and corporate-union-imposed dictatorship that currently dominates North America’s railroads.”

The IBEW’s sabotage of the signal and communications workers strike underscores that it is high time for workers at CN Rail to respond to the appeal of their brothers and sisters at CP Rail by forming their own rank-and-file committee to unify their struggle with rail workers internationally, who all confront ruthless attacks on their living standards and working conditions. This fight must be guided by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) which provides the political leadership and organizational framework to coordinate a worker-led counteroffensive on a global scale based on an anti-capitalist, socialist program.



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