

Over 100,000 federal government workers launch Canada-wide strike

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More than 120,000 Canadian federal public sector workers launched a national strike Wednesday in opposition to the Justin Trudeau-led Liberal government's attempt to impose contracts that would slash their real wages.

According to the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC), the workers' trade union collective bargaining agent, strikers have set up picket lines at more than 250 offices and other work locations across the country.

About 155,000 workers represented by PSAC have been without contracts since 2021. Some 35,000 of these are barred from participating in any walkout or strike due to reactionary "essential services" legislation.

One subset of the workers, labeled the Treasury Board group by the union and numbering 124,000 across 20 government departments, began contract negotiations in June 2021. A second group of 35,000 Canada Revenue Agency workers began bargaining in January 2022.

PSAC represents the largest unionized group of federal government workers. The strike is expected to seriously affect a wide array of services, including revenue and taxation, immigration and citizenship, veterans' affairs, and the functioning of Service Canada facilities.

The federal government workers are determined to fight for higher wages to counteract the raging cost-of-living crisis affecting billions of people worldwide. Other demands include better job security and the winning of remote work arrangements for some workers.

The government workers are pitted in a political struggle against the trade union-backed, New Democratic Party-supported Liberal government, and not just because the government is their employer. The workers' demands represent a direct challenge to the ruling elite's class war agenda, which is aimed at freeing up tens of billions of dollars for Canadian imperialism to wage war abroad and pay for the massive bailout of the financial oligarchy during the COVID-19 pandemic. This agenda is fully endorsed by the trade union bureaucracy, which is a key prop of the Trudeau Liberals. The Canadian Labour Congress, of which PSAC is a member, has cooperated intimately with the pro-

war, big business Liberals since Trudeau came to power in 2015.

To achieve their demands, workers must counterpose to the class strategy of the ruling elite an appeal to the broadest sections of the working class to join them in struggle. There is more than enough money to fund inflation-busting pay increases, but it must be redirected from the mad rearmament bonanza and the subsidizing of the super-rich.

Strikers must mobilize support not only from public and private sector workers across Canada, but from the working class internationally, who are waging struggles over fundamentally the same questions. These include protests by millions of workers and youth against French President Emanuel Macron's decision to raise the retirement age and massive strikes against job and wage cuts by British transport, postal and health workers.

The ruling class is demanding that the Trudeau government act just as ruthlessly as its French and British counterparts. Postmedia called in editorials published in its *Sun* tabloids Tuesday for the immediate criminalization of any strike through emergency back-to-work legislation, while the *Globe and Mail*, the traditional voice of the Bay Street financial elite, arrogantly dismissed workers' wage demands as "ludicrous." The imposition of "below-inflation wage increases—that is a real-terms pay cut—was essential to set a benchmark for other sections of workers and as a first step in a new austerity wave to end a government spending "spree," the *Globe* continued.

The workers voted to strike in response to the government's contract proposals, which would leave the workers significantly worse-off than even before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The government initially tabled a derisory 8.5 percent wage "increase" over four years, which was in line with offers for provincial workers tabled by the hard-right governments in Ontario and Quebec. The latest offer is little better, with a 9 percent raise spread over three years. This includes a retroactive 1.5 percent in 2021 and 4.5 percent in 2022, followed by three percent this year. Meanwhile, official inflation topped 8 percent last year, with

prices for basic necessities like food and energy rising far higher.

Treasury Board President Mona Fortier, speaking for the so-called “progressive” Liberal government, called its offer “fair for the employees and reasonable for taxpayers.” In reality, the government has shown virtually no interest in bargaining during the talks. It repeatedly denounced PSAC for supposedly raising too many demands and in response filed “unfair bargaining” complaints. It then agreed with PSAC to call for a report from the Public Interest Commission, knowing full well that it would table a proposal containing massive real-terms pay cuts. The result was the proposed 9 percent “increase” over three years.

The union’s counteroffer of a 4.5 percent per year pay hike is itself woefully inadequate for meeting workers’ needs, and falls well short of combating inflation. After the PIC report was released with its recommendation for a miserly 9 percent increase over three years, PSAC lyingly declared that it offered “a pathway to make gains for workers.” To underscore its point, PSAC cajoled a small group of 250 workers at NAV Canada into accepting a three-year contract last month whose pay increases top out at a total of nine percent. The union even had the nerve to declare that this contract contained “no concessions.”

As a leading supporter of the Trudeau government and its policies, PSAC has no strategy for waging a genuine struggle for its members’ demands. PSAC has intentionally dragged out the negotiating process for two years by subordinating workers to the reactionary collective bargaining system. It has made no appeal to any other section of workers to support the strike and will capitulate, like every other union over recent years, should the Trudeau government bring forward back-to-work legislation. This is because the PSAC bureaucracy is more concerned about preserving its close working relations with the union-backed Liberal government than it is with securing real improvements to wages and working conditions.

To underscore this, PSAC President Chris Aylward repeatedly said that the union bureaucracy was doing everything it could to avoid a strike and, once the union’s Tuesday 9 p.m. Eastern strike deadline passed, insisted that union negotiators would remain at the bargaining table as long as their government counterparts do. Aylward and the union executive have framed the contract negotiations not as a means of achieving inflation-busting pay hikes—which should be the starting point for any serious bargaining—but as a way of haggling over relatively minor concessions.

Aylward reassured the government that any pickets that do pop up on Wednesday would be held at “strategic” locations. According to the PSAC leader, this would be done to minimize the impact on the public. This is a recipe for

making the strike as ineffectual as possible and minimizing any pressure on Trudeau to accede to the workers’ demands.

Perhaps the surest sign that Aylward and the PSAC bureaucracy are preparing to sell out this important struggle is the praise they have heaped upon the social-democratic NDP and its leader Jagmeet Singh for “supporting” the workers. This should be taken as a serious warning, since bitter experience has shown that the NDP’s involvement in a workers’ struggle invariably amounts to a kiss of death.

Singh claimed at a Monday press conference that federal workers “don’t want to strike.” He continued, “They want to work, but the government has a responsibility now to negotiate a fair contract and respect these workers.” This is the same government that Singh’s NDP has helped keep in power since 2019 and explicitly supported since entering a “confidence-and-supply” agreement with Trudeau in March 2022. Singh justified the need for the 2022 deal because it would provide “political stability,” i.e., the “stability” needed by the ruling class to make workers pay for imperialist war abroad and “post-pandemic” austerity. These are exactly the same arguments now used by the Liberal government to justify real-terms pay cuts for federal government workers.

As Liberal Finance Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland recently put it, “The truth is we can’t fully compensate every single Canadian for all of the effects of inflation or for elevated interest rates.” This came just days before it was revealed that Galen Weston, billionaire heir to the Loblaws grocery empire known for price-gouging, was given an \$8.4 million official salary in 2022 because management felt he was “underpaid.”

Workers must reject the ruling class mantra that there is “no money” to meet their demands, while billions are wasted on war and super-rich parasites. They must seize control of their strike from the union bureaucracy and broaden it to include public sector workers in the provinces and private sector workers across the country, all of whom face the devastating impact of inflation and have a common interest in waging a unified struggle. This requires the formation of rank-and-file committees to enable workers to break out of the isolation imposed on them by PSAC, appeal for support from workers across Canada and internationally, and develop a political fight against the Liberal/NDP/union alliance that stands for austerity and war.



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