Canada’s federal workers’ strike and the global resurgence of the class struggle

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The strike by over 120,000 Canadian federal government workers that began Wednesday constitutes a direct challenge to the Trudeau Liberal government and the entire capitalist elite’s class war agenda of imperialist war against Russia and China and the evisceration of workers’ rights and living standards at home.

That is why the strike has been met with vitriolic denunciations in the corporate media, including demands that it be criminalized by an emergency back-to-work law and lurid stories decrying the “disruption” of public services penned by the same big business hacks who otherwise advocate austerity and privatization.

The strikers, who include revenue and taxation, immigration and citizenship and Service Canada employees, are fighting for wage increases that keep pace with inflation and stronger job security protections.

The federal workers’ strike is part of a global upsurge of the working class against real-wage cuts, attacks on worker protections and democratic rights and the gutting of public services. This upsurge is being driven by the same capitalist crisis that is propelling the ruling elites in all the major powers towards world war. The strike follows the three-month-long mass protests in France against President Emmanuel Macron’s regressive pension reform, and coincides with major strikes by health care and postal workers in Britain and education workers in the United States. Irrespective of their national peculiarities, all of these struggles are objectively defying the ruling class’ efforts to subordinate society’s resources to imperialist war and repeated bailouts of the financial oligarchy.

This understanding must animate the struggle of the federal workers and be elaborated in a conscious political strategy to make the strike the spearhead of a working class counteroffensive against austerity and war and their enforcers—the union- and NDP-supported Trudeau government and the political establishment in its entirety. Such a counteroffensive will only prevail if it strives to unite the growing resistance of workers in Canada with that of workers in the US and internationally.

The federal workers’ trade union bargaining agent, the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC), is the largest union among federal government workers and one of biggest affiliates of the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC). Both PSAC and the CLC have collaborated closely with the Liberal government since it came to power in 2015. This helps explain why PSAC did everything it could to avoid the strike, including by dragging out negotiations for almost two years after the workers’ contracts expired in 2021. PSAC has made no appeal to any other section of workers to join the struggle, even though the problem of rampant inflation is hitting all workers. It has accepted without protest reactionary “essential services” legislation that bars 35,000 of the 155,000 workers in the five bargaining groups now on strike from joining the job action, and has publicly boasted that it is working to limit the strike’s impact.

This is under conditions in which the Trudeau government has acted provocatively throughout the contract negotiations. The government began the talks with an outrageous offer to “increase” wages by a mere 8.5 percent over four years, an offer since slightly improved to 9 percent over three years. At a press conference Wednesday, Treasury Board President Mona Fortier insisted that the government would not go beyond 9 percent. Inflation topped 8 percent last year, with food and energy prices rising more quickly, and has continued to exceed 5 percent in the first four months of 2023.

The ruling class has responded to the strike with undisguised rage. The *Globe and Mail*, house organ of the Bay Street financial elite, arrogantly dismissed the modest 4.5 percent annual increase demanded by PSAC as “ludicrous.” The *Globe* editorial demanded Trudeau set a benchmark for all upcoming contract talks for provincial public-sector and private-sector workers by imposing below-inflation pay deals—that is, real wage cuts. The most right-wing sections of the ruling elite are clamouring for the immediate imposition of back-to-work legislation.

The Trudeau government has previously criminalized Canada Post and Port of Montreal strikes and threatened similar action against railway and other workers. However, at present its preferred course of action is to rely on its “partners” in the trade union bureaucracy and social democratic New Democratic Party (NDP) to isolate the strike, and, after workers have blown off some steam, impose a sellout agreement. PSAC, it must be noted, has given every indication that it plans

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to call off the strike as soon as its negotiators conclude tentative agreements, without giving workers any chance to see, let alone vote on them.

While the Liberal government claims there is “no money” to meet the strikers’ demands, it is lavishing billions of dollars on the US-NATO war with Russia, which is aimed at reducing Russia to the status of a semi-colony and seizing control of its natural resources. The Trudeau government is investing tens of billions in a massive rearmament drive, including the procurement of new fleets of warships and F-35 fighter jets and the “modernization” of the joint Canada-US North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD) to wage “strategic conflict” with Russia and China. Finance Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland is overseeing a “post-pandemic” austerity program to pay for the $650 billion bailout given to big business and the banks in early 2020 when COVID-19 first emerged.

The unions and NDP have been instrumental in enforcing the Trudeau government’s program. During the pandemic, top union bureaucrats like then CLC president and now Senator Hassan Yussuff called for a “collaborative front” with big business to make Canadian business more globally “competitive” and implement the ruling class’ ruinous profits-before-lives pandemic policy, which resulted in successive waves of mass infection and death.

Less than one month after the US, Canada and their European imperialist allies succeeded in goading Russia into invading Ukraine, the NDP, with full-throated union support, formed a governmental alliance with Trudeau that stopped just short of a coalition. Under the Liberal-NDP “confidence-and-supply” agreement, the NDP has pledged to prop up Trudeau’s Liberals through 2025. NDP leader Jagmeet Singh justified the agreement, which formalized the support given by the NDP to the minority Liberal government since 2019, by claiming that it would bring “political stability.” By this he meant “stability” for the ruling elite to implement its class war agenda.

In light of this record, Singh’s attempt Monday to posture as a friend of the strikers with the vow that the NDP would never vote for back-to-work legislation is laughable. If Singh can make such a statement, it is because he knows full well that should the Liberal government choose this route, it would receive the more than eager support of the Official Opposition Conservatives, thereby ensuring a strikebreaking law’s speedy adoption. While making well-publicized visits to picket lines to boost his “pro-worker” credentials, Singh is no doubt offering his services to act as a go-between for the PSAC and CLC leaderships and government officials.

The trade union/NDP/Liberal alliance has served as a key mechanism for suppressing the class struggle in Canada over recent decades. One of the latest examples of this was last November’s strike by 55,000 education support workers in Ontario. After the hard-right provincial government introduced draconian legislation banning the strike, the workers courageously defied it, galvanizing overwhelming working class support. Singh issued an appeal to Trudeau to intervene, prompting the prime minister to hold a meeting with union leaders on the first day of the job action.

With calls growing for a general strike and rallies taking place across the province, the leaders of the CLC and most of its principal affiliates entered into backroom talks with Ontario Premier Doug Ford to persuade him to retract the strike ban in exchange for shutting down the strike. After the unions successfully demobilized the struggle, the Ford government succeeded with union support in ramming through a below-inflation pay settlement on the low-paid workers.

If the federal government workers are to prevail in their struggle, they must break free from the straitjacket that the union/NDP/Liberal alliance constitutes, broaden their struggle by mobilizing support throughout the working class in opposition to austerity and war and fight for the development of a mass independent political movement of the working class. Its goal should be the establishment of a workers’ government committed to socialist policies in order to redistribute society’s vast resources to meet social needs, not private profit.

Such a struggle can only be developed by federal workers taking the control of their strike out of the hands of the government-aligned union bureaucrats. This means building rank-and-file strike committees at every workplace politically and organizationally independent of the union and PSAC bureaucracy and democratically controlled by the rank-and-file. Such committees must counter attempts of the union apparatus to isolate the strike by directly appealing to provincial public-sector workers and working people throughout the private sector for support, including solidarity strikes. The committees must vigorously oppose any effort by PSAC to shut down the strike without the demands of the rank-and-file being met and prepare to defy any back-to-work legislation introduced by Trudeau. A special appeal must be directed to workers across the border in the United States, who confront a ruling class equally determined to make them pay for imperialist war and the bailouts of the financial oligarchy.

We urge all striking workers and their supporters who agree with this perspective to make plans to attend the International online May Day Rally. It is being organized by the *World Socialist Web Site*, the International Committee of the Fourth International, its affiliated Socialist Equality Parties and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, and will be held on Sunday, April 30, starting at 3 p.m. Eastern North American time.

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