

“I’m sure there are thousands of ‘me’s in France, feeling the same way”:

Strike by over 100,000 Canadian federal government workers continues for third day

Our reporters
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A strike by over 100,000 Canadian federal government workers has entered its third day as the Trudeau Liberal government underscores it has no intention of giving ground to the workers’ demands. Employees of the revenue and taxation, immigration and citizenship, and veterans’ affairs departments, as well as Service Canada, are calling for wage increases that keep pace with inflation, better job security provisions, and the right to work remotely.

The strikers, who have been without a contract for two years, are represented in bargaining by the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC). PSAC is demanding a 4.5 percent annual wage increase for the duration of the three-year deal, which would represent a major real-terms pay cut. Inflation topped 8 percent last year and is still currently over 5 percent, with food prices rising at double that rate. Supported by a vicious ruling-class campaign that denounces the strikers as overpaid and contemptuously dismisses their demands, the Trudeau government has acted provocatively throughout bargaining. It has made clear that it has no intention of budging beyond its latest insulting proposal to “increase” wages by a meagre 9 percent over three years.

The walkout coincides with a global resurgence of the class struggle, with workers in Europe and the United States mounting strikes over the same fundamental issues that underlie the federal government workers’ strike. In France, millions of workers have protested and taken strike action over recent months to oppose President Emmanuel Macron’s ramming through of a brutal assault on workers’ pension rights. In the United States, hundreds of thousands of workers confront contract struggles in the coming weeks and months that pose the necessity of mounting a working-class political challenge to capitalist austerity and war to secure their demands, which, like those of the striking workers in Canada, include wages that keep pace with the cost of living and job protections.

World Socialist Web Site reporters have discussed these issues

and the way forward for workers in their struggle at picket lines in Kitchener and Mississauga in Ontario, and Quebec City over recent days. Workers expressed a determination to fight for wage increases to keep pace with inflation and noted the common features of their struggle with those conducted by workers internationally.

Strikers were eager to speak at length on the difficulties of covering basic living costs amid rampant inflation, and angrily rejected the denunciation of their struggle by the corporate media.

Speaking on PSAC’s wage demand, a striker noted, “When you break it down, we haven’t had a cost of living increase since 2020. When you look at inflation and pandemic stuff, it’s really not that much money.”

Another added, “At the end of the day, we’re here to support our fellow colleagues. It’s time we got a deal, because it has been two years. We’re in arrears, because next year we’re gonna do this again. It’s just one of those things where we’d like to be able to support our families.”

Diana, a striker in Mississauga, explained the challenges posed by the rising cost of living, commenting, “I don’t go out for dinner at all. I don’t go to movies any more. I literally don’t do anything any more. All I do is work, pay my bills, walk my dog in the park. There you go.”

Workers contrasted this to the lavish sums of money made available to the super-rich. Asked what she thought of the government’s claim that it cannot afford to grant public servants a wage increase that keeps pace with inflation in light of its funnelling \$650 billion to the banks, businesses and wealthy investors with no strings attached at the onset of the pandemic, Olivia replied, “Don’t we also deserve something? We served through the pandemic. We’re essential services. Everything from cradle to the grave. We’re asking for a humble raise.”

“The government gets away with their policy-making,” she continued. “Whoever’s impacted in the corporate world, they also get away with everything. It’s the small guy that gets screwed. And we’re the small guy. We’re just public servants, we’re getting screwed as much as anyone else at the bottom.”

A strike captain in Kitchener commented on the government’s arrogant attitude to bargaining and pointed out how workers’

collective bargaining rights have been eroded. “One thing the public doesn’t know is that our contracts expire and it takes years for them to get renegotiated. So we’re not negotiating our contracts before they expire any more like we did when I started 15 years ago. Now it’s four years before we’re renegotiating. So you can imagine the next one will be two or three years from now. This one expired in 2021,” he said.

Addressing the vicious anti-strike propaganda in the media, a picket in Quebec City commented, “I read an article in the newspaper that said ‘the list of requests from civil servants is long. ...’ No! There’s not a long list. It’s two things, it’s the salary and teleworking (remote work). It’s on these two things that it stumbles. But there’s not a long list ... like we’re crying all the time.”

In respect to the pandemic, which officially has killed more than 50,000 Canadians and left untold numbers with debilitating Long COVID, strikers stressed the additional burden it has placed on them. Two workers in Quebec City, who said they had contracted COVID twice and four times respectively, recalled how they were forced to work overtime in order to process unemployment benefits and other social welfare payments.

Discussions with workers rapidly turned to the international context in which the strike is taking place. Although PSAC and the entire union bureaucracy insist on portraying the strike in purely national terms, workers had no trouble in recognizing the common features of their fight and the struggles under way by workers and young people in other countries against capitalist austerity.

“It’s never been easy to have a family like I do with three boys, but it’s becoming impossible,” commented Olivia in Mississauga. “And I’m sure there’s a ‘me’ in France, or even thousands of them, who are feeling the same way. We just can’t take it lying down any more.”

“The middle class is disappearing. All of us are just getting pushed deeper and deeper into hardship or even poverty,” said Diana.

Workers explained how their demand for the right to work remotely would help them achieve a better balance between their professional and family lives. They also pointed to the financial benefits under conditions in which their paychecks are stretched. “Thankfully we don’t have to drive if we’re working remotely. Otherwise you add another \$500 for your car and \$300 for gas,” stated Olivia. “That’s \$800 just for transportation every month.”

While refusing to make any concessions on the issue of remote work, the Trudeau government is cynically encouraging government workers to scab on the strike by working from home. According to a report in the *Globe and Mail*, government officials emphasized in press briefings that workers can continue to receive full pay during the strike by logging on to their work accounts remotely.

This is part of a deliberate strategy by the Trudeau government to weaken and isolate the strike, which is being facilitated by their union allies. Strikers told the WSWs that PSAC is providing pitifully low levels of strike pay, undermining workers’ ability to mount a long strike in the face of an intransigent government determined to slash government operating costs and services while spending tens of billions on the Ukraine war and preparing for war

with China. A picket in Mississauga said, “I think they’re gonna let us sit out until we can’t take it anymore.

“We can’t survive on strike pay. PSAC gives us \$75 a day. Some locals will top that up if they have the funds, but not all of them do. So most of us will be getting a fraction of our salary, and that’s only if you come and picket.

“For me, I live in Toronto. That doesn’t go very far. So how long can I afford to do this? I can’t cross the picket line, because I’ll be fined, and I don’t want to cross the picket line. But I also want to pay my bills. So I don’t know what’s going to happen. But to me it doesn’t look good. I’m hoping for a deal, but I don’t know that we’re going to get what we want.”

The chief obstacle to the development of a genuine struggle for inflation-busting wage increases and job protections is the trade union bureaucracy and its alliance with the governing Liberal Party and the social-democratic New Democratic Party. This alliance—now codified in a “supply and confidence agreement” under which the NDP has pledged to ensure the minority Liberal government remains in power through June 2025—has been a key mechanism for suppressing the class struggle for decades, and has spearheaded implementation of the ruling elite’s agenda of imperialist war abroad and austerity for workers at home.

Breaking free of the suffocating political control exerted by the unions and NDP and their Liberal allies depends on workers seizing control of their strike from the union bureaucracy by establishing rank-and-file strike committees. These committees must do everything in their power to broaden the struggle to other sections of public and private sector workers, prepare mass defiance of any government back-to-work law and fight for a political counter-offensive by the working class to redistribute society’s vast resources to meet social needs, not private profit.

Support for broadening the struggle is strong among strikers, who recognize that their fight is being waged for the entire working class.

“I know if I was forced to accept a bad contract and another union asked me to rip it up and go on a joint strike, I’d a hundred percent support it,” said a striker.

“Lastly I want to say we’re not just fighting for us. We’re fighting for all workers in Canada. We’re sacrificing ourselves to try and improve things for everyone.”



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