

Battle lines harden in Canadian federal workers' strike

Keith Jones
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Workers across Canada and internationally should rally to the support of the more than 100,000 striking Canadian federal government workers.

The workers, who walked off the job April 19, are fighting over issues that are of critical importance to workers everywhere: protection from rampant inflation; increased job security; and changes in work rules to make for better work-life balance.

Their struggle is part of a growing upsurge of the global working class that has seen millions of workers in France wage three months of mass protests and strikes against President Emmanuel Macron's brutal, antidemocratic pension cuts; a growing strike wave across Europe fueled by price rises and attacks on social rights; and US railway workers reject concession-filled contracts endorsed by their unions, only to have the Biden administration and Congress outlaw an impending strike.

The Canadian ruling class is adamant that the phony "progressive," union-backed federal Liberal government impose real-wage cuts on the federal workers, so as to set a regressive benchmark for all workers nationwide, public and private sector alike.

As the strike began, the *Globe and Mail*, one of the properties of the Thomson family, Canada's richest billionaires, bluntly declared, "Ottawa needs to stick to its position for below-inflation wage increases."

The ruling elite has also reacted with anger and venom to workers' demand that some categories of federal employees be granted the right to work remotely some of the time. They have denounced this as a threat to "managerial rights," and, to use the words of the head of the Royal Bank of Canada, the country's largest bank, "productivity."

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his Liberal government are heeding the calls they make an example of the federal workers so as to stomp out a growing wave of worker militancy. They have assumed a provocative stance throughout the more than two-year-long negotiations for new contracts for administrative, maintenance, and emergency workers, including firefighters, employed by Service Canada, numerous government departments, and Revenue Canada.

Yesterday, Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland again touted

the government's revised wage offer of 3 percent per year in a three-year contract retroactive to 2021 as "very fair." This under conditions where the official inflation rate surpassed 8 percent last year and food prices have continued to rise at a rate of more than 10 percent in 2022. Previously Freeland has said the strikers' demands threaten the government's "post-pandemic" cost-cutting drive.

While claiming that they are eager to reach a negotiated agreement to end the strike, Trudeau and Freeland are making clear that their proffered velvet-gloved hand is in fact a mailed fist.

Even as it denounces the workers for seeking to enshrine a right to remote work, the government has exercised its "managerial rights" by actively encouraging workers to scab on the strike by working remotely. At the end of the last week, negotiations stalled as the government denounced the workers' bargaining agent, the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC), as "inflexible."

Key government talking points are in fact only more tempered versions of the stream of invective and lies the big-business media have issued against the strikers over the past week. Whether it be in English Canada or Quebec, the editorial writers and op-ed columnists have denounced the workers' demands as "ludicrous," painted them as fat cats—although the vast majority make less than \$70,000 a year and many as little as \$40,000—and sought to pit workers against each other by claiming any pay increases for federal workers will come from other workers' taxes.

The reality is society has ample resources. When it came to bailing out the banks and financial markets at the beginning of the pandemic, the government and Bank of Canada were able to mobilize \$650 billion in a matter of days. If public services are in a shambles, food bank use at a record high, and many if not most working people living from pay cheque to pay cheque, it is because society's resources are monopolized by a financial elite and squandered in pursuit of their predatory economic and geopolitical interests.

Even as it declares workers must accept real-wage cuts and public services are being bled white, the Trudeau government is pouring tens of billions into waging war alongside NATO against Russia and preparing for war with China by

dramatically expanding the Canadian military's firepower through the acquisition of new fleets of warship and 88 F-35 fighter jets, and the "modernization" of the joint Canada-US North American Defence Command (NORAD).

To prevail, the striking federal workers must make the implicit challenge their struggle constitutes to the ruling class agenda of war and austerity explicit. An appeal for a working class counteroffensive against militarism, inflation-driven wage cuts, and the slashing of public services and for social equality would elicit a groundswell of support as did the Ontario education support staff workers' defiance of a vicious anti-strike law last November.

But the leaders of PSAC and the Canadian Labour Congress are close allies of the Trudeau government. They are enthusiastic supporters of the "confidence and supply" agreement under which the trade union-sponsored New Democratic Party (NDP) has pledged to keep the minority Liberal government in office through June 2025.

The union bureaucracy and their social-democratic NDP allies are determined to keep the federal workers' struggle confined within the straitjacket of a trade union collective bargaining struggle and the politics of the capitalist establishment.

These are the same forces that swooped in to snuff out the Ontario education workers' strike as it threatened to become a general strike and a direct challenge to the hated Doug Ford-led Ontario Progressive Conservative government. In secret back-channel talks, the leaders of the CLC and its most important affiliates agreed to order the striking support staff workers back to work in exchange for Ford rescinding his draconian anti-strike law. Then, once the workers were demobilized, they forced through a concessionary contract.

While PSAC President Chris Aylward may make the occasional fiery speeches and even observe that in repressing the wages of federal workers the government "is repressing wages for all workers across the country," the PSAC bureaucracy has and continues to do everything to limit and isolate the federal workers' struggle.

They allowed the government to drag on negotiations for years after the previous contracts expired. They meekly accepted the government's "essential service" legislation, meaning some 45,000 of the 155,000 workers in the five bargaining units on strike are continuing to work. And they have already signalled that they are backing off even their inadequate (less than inflation) demand of an annual wage increase of just 4.5 percent for most of the workers concerned.

From the first day of the strike, the most right-wing sections of the capitalist press aligned with the official opposition Conservatives, have called for the government to outlaw the strike. The right to strike has been under systematic attack for decades, with all parties, including the NDP, passing emergency back-to-work laws. In 1991, the Mulroney Conservative government criminalized a three-week federal

workers' strike. The current Liberal government used emergency laws to break a Canada Post strike in 2018 and a strike by Montreal dockworkers in 2021, and has repeatedly threatened such action against railway and other workers.

However, Trudeau's preference is to use his partners in the union bureaucracy and NDP to impose a sellout agreement. After all, they have played a pivotal role in propping up his government and suppressing the class struggle. They fully supported the government's ruinous profits-before-lives pandemic policy, which resulted in wave after wave of mass infection and death, and they are staunch supporters of the Ukraine war and rearmament. Significantly, while Aylward and other PSAC leaders were quick to criticize the gargantuan \$13 billion subsidy the Trudeau government announced last week for Volkswagen's under-construction southern Ontario battery facility, they breathe not a word about the far bigger sums Ottawa is devoting to war.

The striking federal workers must beware. The corporatist union apparatus will run their struggle into the ground, unless they take it into their own hands. This requires that they build rank-and-file committees in every workplace, politically and organizationally independent of the union apparatus, and repudiate the anti-worker union-NDP-Liberal alliance.

The first task of such committees would be to broaden the struggle by reaching out to other sections of workers across Canada and internationally. The strike must be made into the spearhead of a working class counteroffensive, mobilizing opposition to all the attacks on working people's social and democratic rights, and developing a mass movement for a workers' government and the socialist reorganization of socio-economic life, so meeting human needs, not producing profit for a handful of bloated oligarchs, will be its animating principle.

A special appeal should be made to workers in the United States, where the media systematically blacks out all struggles of the international working class, including those raging in its neighbour to the north.

Almost exactly one month ago, on March 23-24, Biden came to Ottawa to strengthen the military-security partnership between Canadian and US imperialism and the Canada-US-Mexico economic bloc for trade war, world war and class war at home. In opposition to this predatory alliance, workers in the US and Canada must revive and invest with a socialist political orientation their long tradition of militant joint struggle, including in the mass industrial upsurge of the 1930s and 1940s.



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