Canada’s pseudo-left Fightback group upholds authority of unions and NDP as they sabotage federal government workers’ strike

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Over 100,000 federal government workers in Canada have been on strike since Wednesday, April 19, for wage increases that keep pace with inflation, job protection measures, and the right to work remotely.

As the strike began, the pseudo-left Fightback group, the Canadian section of the misnamed International Marxist Tendency, published a major statement, “PSAC’s 155,000 federal workers preparing for picket lines: Strike to win!” Fightback’s purported strategy to win seeks to confine the federal workers’ struggle within the framework of a national collective bargaining dispute. If workers are militant and exert enough pressure, or so claims Fightback, they can compel the right-wing leaderships of the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) and the New Democratic Party (NDP) to fight for and secure their demands.

This perspective is the direct opposite of that advanced by the *World Socialist Web Site*. From the outset we have stressed that the strikers face a political struggle, and not just because the Trudeau Liberal government is their employer. Objectively the strike is a challenge to the ruling class drive to strengthen Canadian imperialism’s global strategic position and “competitiveness,” by funnelling vast resources to the pursuit of war in Ukraine, preparing for war with China, imposing inflation-driven real-wage cuts and dismantling and privatizing public services.

If the federal workers are to prevail against the capitalist elite and its state, they must make their struggle the spearhead of a working-class industrial and political offensive opposing war and austerity and fighting to develop a mass movement for a workers’ government.

This requires that workers repudiate the anti-worker union/NDP/Liberal alliance, whereby the PSAC and Canadian Labour Congress bureaucrats and Jagmeet Singh and his New Democrats are joined at the hip with the Trudeau Liberal government. The same government that is determined to impose below-inflation wage “increases” on the strikers, while spending tens of billions on waging war in Ukraine and buying new fleets of warships and F-35 fighter jets.

To win, workers must break free of the political and organizational control of the labour bureaucrats and take the struggle into their own hands by building rank-and-file strike committees in every workplace. In direct opposition to Fightback’s nationalist perspective and its attempt to straitjacket workers within a collective bargaining struggle led by government supporters, the WSWS has emphasized an urgent task of these committees will be to unify the strike in Canada with the growing global upsurge of the working class. In this way, an independent political movement of the working class capable of challenging the ruling elite’s class war agenda of austerity and imperialist war can and will be built.

This strategy is anathema to Fightback, which like its political godfather, the Pabloite Ted Grant, has remained steadfastly loyal to the union and social democratic bureaucracies. Over the past 40 years, the trade union bureaucracy has developed lucrative corporatist ties with the capitalist state and big business, and systematically suppressed the class struggle. As for the NDP, like other social democratic parties around the world, it long ago junked the remnants of its national-reformist program, and today functions as a right-wing bourgeois party virtually indistinguishable from its Liberal and Conservative rivals.

Fightback sees its task as defending the authority of these discredited organizations at all costs, all the more so under conditions in which a resurgence of the class struggle in Canada and around the world is creating the conditions for the working class to break free of their grip, assert its political independence, and challenge capitalist rule.

Fightback’s insistence that workers must remain within the bounds of the state-designed, pro-employer collective bargaining system that has helped the ruling class to impose decades of wage concessions and other attacks is made clear in their statement when they discuss the threat of back-to-work legislation. Given the vicious response of the ruling elite to the strike, and the fact that the Trudeau Liberals and other governments have used dozens of these laws over the years to criminalize strikes, the danger of such legislation is very real. Rank-and-file workers must prepare to defy such a law by establishing rank-and-file committees to break out of the isolation imposed on their strike by PSAC and broaden it to other sections of workers.

Fightback opposes this and insists that any initiative must come from the union bureaucracy. They recall the federal government workers’ strike in 1991, which was ended by a back-to-work law imposed by the Progressive Conservative government of Brian Mulroney. PSAC and the rest of the union bureaucracy dutifully complied with the strike ban, with PSAC leaders forcing their members back on the job with a miserable settlement. “This was a big mistake,” Fightback declares in conclusion.

Far from being a “mistake,” PSAC’s behaviour in 1991 was in keeping with how the trade union bureaucracy has invariably acted for the past four decades. Time and again, union leaders have worked hand-in-glove with federal and provincial governments, and corporate managements to smother strikes, including by serving as the enforcers

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of back-to-work laws. The reason for this is that the unions are not, as Fightback likes to claim, workers' organizations that have lost their way and are saddled with a few bad leaders. They are in fact appendages of the capitalist state and corporate management, led by a privileged bureaucratic caste with interests alien and hostile to the workers they purport to represent and whose chief task is to suppress the class struggle on behalf of the ruling elite.

It is revealing in this regard that Fightback cryptically remarks that Trudeau is not as "brazen" as Mulroney. However, they do not dwell on this point, because explaining Trudeau's less confrontational style would require one to analyze how the Liberal Prime Minister—not without considerable success—has relied on his trade union partners to pursue the class war agenda of Canadian capital. Above all, it would require an examination of the record of close collaboration on various fronts between the unions and Liberals since Trudeau came to power in 2015, from the trade war policies developed through the renegotiation of NAFTA, to Canada's massive rearmament program, and the waging of war against Russia in alliance with American imperialism. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the unions took their collaboration with the Trudeau government to a qualitatively new level, first by supporting the $650 billion bailout of Bay Street and big business, and then by forcing workers to return to workplaces that quickly became locations of mass infection and death.

Due to its intimate ties to the union bureaucracy, Fightback is both incapable and unwilling to address any of these issues. While it has on occasion made limited criticisms of the NDP for entering the "confidence-and-supply" agreement with the Liberals in March 2022 that will guarantee Trudeau a parliamentary majority through June 2025, the group never utters a word about the union bureaucracy's hand in orchestrating this governmental alliance. One would search the pages of their "Marxist" publication in vain for a reference to the basic fact, widely acknowledged by bourgeois journalists, that the unions are key allies and supporters of the Trudeau government.

In its effort to strengthen the authority of the trade unions and NDP, Fightback presents an entirely false narrative of last November's strike by 55,000 education support workers in Ontario. The strike was a courageous act of defiance by the overwhelmingly low-paid workers to a strike ban imposed by the hard-right provincial Ford government. The strike galvanized support throughout the working class, with calls emerging for a general strike. Precisely to prevent such a development, the unions swooped in to throw Ford a lifeline. Leaders from Canada's most important unions persuaded him to withdraw his strike ban in exchange for the strike being called off. After the unions served as de facto enforcers of Ford's strike ban by scuttling the strike, they connived to impose a below-inflation settlement on the workers that met none of their original demands.

Fightback hails this abject betrayal by the Canadian Labour Congress, Unifor, and the Canadian Union of Public Employees, among others, as a "victory" that federal government workers should emulate. "If the education workers did it with one third the number of employees on strike and in one province only, there is no reason why PSAC can't do the same thing on a larger scale from coast to coast," they write. "The entire labour movement needs to be ready to support a movement in defense of the right to strike, and be on a war footing to come out in the streets in support of the PSAC workers." They even give a clean bill of health to PSAC leader Chris Aylward, who heads one of Canada's more conservative unions and bears considerable responsibility for making workers go without a contract for over two years. Aylward's demagogic answer to a journalist's attempt to accuse him of using "aggressive" strike tactics was, according to Fightback, "a great response, one that will certainly help mobilize and enthuse workers to fight."

Behind the radical-sounding bluster about keeping workers "in the streets," Fightback insists that political control remain in the hands of Aylward, the union bureaucracy, and NDP leader Jagmeet Singh, who has propped up the pro-war, pro-austerity Liberals since 2019. As Fightback writes, "If Trudeau introduces back-to-work legislation, the NDP must reply with a no-confidence motion."

In other words, while the working class remains straitjacketed under the right-wing leadership of the PSAC bureaucracy, the question of bringing down the very government that is enforcing savage attacks on their wages and conditions is to be resolved through a parliamentary maneuver in which the workers have absolutely no role to play. Were the strikers to follow Fightback's disastrous policy, the most likely outcome of the bringing down of the minority Trudeau government by an NDP no-confidence motion while the unions keep the working class politically muzzled would be the coming to power of the far-right Tory leader Pierre Poilievre, who enjoys the backing of wide sections of the ruling class that have soured on Trudeau's Liberals for not still more aggressively attacking the working class and asserting Canadian imperialist interests overseas.

Fightback's injunction that workers confine themselves to a militant trade union "collective bargaining" struggle—and leave the politics to the right-wing, Liberal government-allied trade union and NDP leaders—is a recipe for defeat. It flows from this pseudo-left group's nationalist and pro-capitalist outlook, disbelief in and hostility to mobilizing the working class as an independent political force, and its social constituency in the privileged middle class. Its members are paid-up members of the NDP and, in Quebec the *indépendantiste* and pro-war Québec Solidaire, and inveterate defenders of the union bureaucracy who view any challenge from below with a mixture of fear and contempt.

Striking federal government workers can only succeed in their struggle to the extent that they free themselves from the debilitating political influence of the unions and NDP, and their pseudo-left appendages like Fightback. This requires that the workers build rank-and-file strike committees, which will enable them to break out of the collective bargaining framework and appeal to broader sections of workers to join a political struggle against the Trudeau government and its defenders. This will depend upon the development of a socialist and internationalist perspective for the federal government workers' strike that seeks to make it the spearhead of a working class-led counter-offensive against austerity and war. This is the program fought for by the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site*.

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