

“It all comes down to one point—The cost of living”: Canada’s federal government workers’ strike enters second week

Our reporters
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The strike by over 100,000 Canadian federal government workers for wage increases that keep pace with inflation, job protection measures, and remote work guarantees entered its second week Wednesday. While the pro-war, pro-austerity Justin Trudeau-led Liberal government is doubling down on its hardline stance in opposition to the strikers’ demands, workers on the picket line are more determined than ever to continue and broaden their fight.

The striking workers, from Service Canada, numerous other government departments, and the Canada Revenue Agency, insist that the Public Service Alliance of Canada’s (PSAC) original wage demand for pay increases of 4.5 percent per year in a three-year contract is the absolute minimum they can accept. They have been working without a contract for two years under pandemic conditions and rampant inflation. As a Service Canada picket in Mississauga told the *World Socialist Web Site* Tuesday, “We’re nowhere close to comparing with what’s happening with inflation. We’re still making the same real wages that workers made in 2007.

“We’re in need of better wages. A lot of our employees are also under contract. So they don’t have indeterminate work or job security, because people are obtained for work under contract, whether it’s six months or one year. They don’t know whether it’ll be renewed after that time period. So we’re worried about their security.”

Lisa added, “I think our strike could set standards for employers across the board to set a higher standard. We’re not asking for a lot. We’re asking for a fair wage according to the cost of living crisis.

“Bank interest rates have skyrocketed, and the signs aren’t getting any better. Gas prices, groceries, everything. We can’t do half the things we used to do any more. It all comes down to one point. The cost of living.”

Sam said, “You want good service from us. We’re providing that. All we’re saying is treat us fairly. The equity is not there. You have those in the upper echelons who do

get bonuses. These are not your average public servants.

“We’re here making between \$40,000 and \$60,000 per year and still can’t make ends meet. Let’s do better. Shame on our government!”

This sentiment has animated a series of workers’ struggles that have swept across the world in recent months. From major strikes by health care, postal, and other workers in Britain, to the mass protests in France against Macron’s pension reform and major industrial struggles in the US, workers internationally are coming ever more openly into conflict with a ruling elite that is seeking to impose the cost of the capitalist crisis, including the tens of billions being funneled into waging war against Russia, onto working people’s backs.

PSAC, which is a key supporter of the same Trudeau government that is determined to impose real wage cuts on its members, has indicated that its negotiators have already retreated, more than once, on the workers’ wage demands. Without even telling strikers what the new figure PSAC negotiators are demanding is, union national president Chris Aylward asserted at a press conference Wednesday, “We have moved off our earlier wage demands. We have compromised.”

This miserable climbdown is in keeping with PSAC’s policy throughout the contract talks. First, it dragged out bargaining interminably, even when the Trudeau government behaved in an extremely provocative manner. Then, when the strike finally got under way April 19, it limited picket-line participation to a few hundred members in each location and made no appeal for other sections of workers to join the strike.

PSAC, the Canadian Labour Congress and the entire union bureaucracy have also cast the strike as a purely national event. As for the unions in the United States, they have remained entirely silent about the fact that a massive strike by more than a hundred thousand workers is taking place right across the border.

Workers, on the other hand, recognize that the fundamental issues driving the strike are the same as those fuelling an upsurge of workers' struggles in every country. Lisa, referring to the global resurgence of strikes and protests by workers, said, "It's also happening because of the pandemic. It has brought everything to this point. We saw how global the conditions were with COVID. And it showed us all how much everyone in every country is struggling."

She continued on the pandemic, "When the MPs (Members of Parliament) get their raise, how come that's justifiable? How fair is it to work for three years without a contract? Everyone here has been so committed to keeping the machinery running through the pandemic. We've worked day and night, we don't get paid overtime, and we put in all this dedication and work."

Speaking for the Trudeau government, Treasury Board President Mona Fortier reiterated Wednesday that it will not budge from its pathetic offer of a 9 percent pay "increase" over three years. This figure is based on a report filed by the supposedly neutral, but in fact government-sponsored Public Interest Commission (PIC). Underscoring her contempt for anything that could genuinely be called bargaining, Fortier declared, "We need PSAC to start bringing their demands in line with the Public Interest Commission recommendations."

Earlier Wednesday, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau gave a veiled warning that his government could adopt back-to-work legislation to criminalize the strike. Addressing the Liberal Party parliamentary caucus, Trudeau said, "The union is certainly very aware of Canadians' impatience and they have to calibrate that carefully." Trudeau previously criminalized strikes by postal workers in 2018 and dock workers at the Port of Montreal in 2021.

Both Industry Minister François-Philippe Champagne and Transport Minister Omar Alghabra have said they are closely monitoring the strike's impact on ports, airports, and other federally-regulated infrastructure, similarly seeking to lay the political groundwork for a draconian antistrike law.

However, the government's preferred option remains to use the union bureaucracy and the union-sponsored NDP to impose a sellout agreement. With the unions' enthusiastic support, the NDP has been in a formal governmental alliance with the Liberals since March 2022, under which it is pledged to sustain the minority Liberals in office through June 2025.

Asked on the picket line about the threat of being legislated back to work, strikers responded angrily. "The reality is this. We're exercising our right. We're fed up with being disrespected and undervalued," said Sam. Lisa added, "They say we're a democratic country, so that would totally contradict that. We have a right to organize and a right to

strike.

"If that law does come though, we have a democratic right to fight it to the end, as much as each of us can afford, anyway. As you know, strikes are difficult financially for those who are on strike."

These are healthy sentiments, but they can only be acted upon if workers take the conduct of their struggle into their own hands by establishing rank-and-file strike committees, organizationally and politically independent of the union bureaucracies. The trade unions have invariably bowed before dozens of back-to-work laws implemented by governments of all political stripes over the past four decades, and PSAC will do no differently if Trudeau makes good on his threat. The only viable response for workers in such a situation would be to appeal through their rank-and-file committees to other sections of workers to broaden the fight and make their strike the spearhead of a political struggle against the Trudeau government's program of austerity and war.

The preparation of such a struggle cannot be delayed, however. Irrespective as to whether the Trudeau government chooses a back-to-work law or its preferred route of using PSAC to enforce a sellout, the striking workers confront a political fight. The turn must be to the development of a mass counter-offensive led by the working class for decent-paying, secure jobs, well-funded public services, and an end to the wasting of billions of dollars on imperialist war and bailouts for the super-rich.

Strikers who agree with this program should begin establishing rank-and-file strike committees at their workplaces so they can draw broader layers of workers into the struggle to place the social needs of the vast majority ahead of the profit interests of a tiny few. In this struggle, they will find ready supporters among hundreds of thousands of workers across the country currently working without contracts, including 600,000 Quebec public sector workers, whose contracts expired in March, and 200,000 Ontario teachers, who have been working without a contract since August 2022.



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