

Strike by over 100,000 Canadian federal government workers in grave danger

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The strike by over 100,000 federal government workers in Canada, now almost halfway through its second week, is in grave danger of being sabotaged and betrayed by the pro-Trudeau government trade union bureaucrats and their New Democratic Party (NDP) allies.

The workers—administrative, maintenance, and emergency staff from Service Canada, numerous other departments and Revenue Canada—took to the picket lines April 19 to fight for wage increases that keep pace with inflation, job security protections, and remote work guarantees. Upwards of 45,000 of the 155,000 workers in the five bargaining units involved in the strike are prohibited by reactionary “essential services” legislation from participating in the job action.

The determination among rank-and-file workers to wage a militant struggle for their demands is strong. Despite the federal Liberal government’s appeals for workers to scab on the strike by continuing to work remotely, its own figures show that more than 90 percent of the workers legally allowed to strike have done so.

Strikers have explained to the *World Socialist Web Site* why they need a pay increase that keeps pace with inflation after three years without a raise, and why they should have the right to work from home after proving during the pandemic that they can maintain services remotely. However, if this militancy is to be sustained and workers to prevail over a government that has publicly flaunted its determination to impose real wage cuts and is making ever more explicit threats of an emergency back-to-work law, they must seize control of the struggle from the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) and Canadian Labour Congress bureaucrats and fight to rally support from the entire working class.

This requires the building of rank-and-file strike committees, independent of the union apparatus, and with the aim of initiating a worker-led counter-offensive to fight for decent-paying secure jobs for all, defend worker’ rights, and put a stop to the evisceration of public services.

The main political obstacles to such a fight are the trade union bureaucrats, the social-democratic NDP politicians and the reactionary alliance they have formed with the Liberals, the traditional preferred governing party of Canadian capital. The union/NDP/Liberal alliance has long served as a key political mechanism to suppress the class struggle and is now being used to smother opposition to the ruling class’ agenda of war, huge inflation-driven real wage cuts, austerity and privatization.

The strikers confront a ruling elite, led by the Trudeau government, that is relentless in its drive to make working people pay for the capitalist crisis. To secure the tens of billions it needs to wage war against Russia, prepare for war with China and bail out the super-rich,

Trudeau and his backers in the financial oligarchy are determined to impose “post-pandemic” austerity, including further cuts in living standards. Thus the *Globe and Mail*, the traditional voice of Bay Street and a prize asset of the Thomson family, Canada’s wealthiest billionaires, railed in an editorial Thursday against the strikers—the vast majority of whom make less than \$70,000 per year—for trying to “further plump their positions” and resisting the government’s “far from unreasonable ... push for its workers to share in the economic pain.”

As for the PSAC leadership, it has already abandoned its demand for annual wage increases of 4.5 percent in a three-year contract—a percentage increase that PSAC President Chris Aylward previously admitted would still leave workers wages’ behind inflation—and is refusing to reveal what its “new” reduced pay demand is.

With the strikers kept in the dark, the contract negotiations are ever more clearly revealed to be a conspiracy, in which the union bureaucrats work with the government and NDP leader Jagmeet Singh to cook up a sellout. This comes as no surprise given the key role played by the labour bureaucrats in backing the pro-war, pro-austerity Liberal government.

The viciousness of the ruling elite flows from the fact that the strike objectively represents a challenge to its class war agenda of austerity and war. The workers’ demands are contemptuously dismissed as an illegitimate claim on wealth that could otherwise be squandered on warplanes and other military equipment, supporting the far-right government in Ukraine, or boosting profits on Bay Street.

No less importantly, the ruling class wants Trudeau to impose a below-inflation pay settlement on the strikers so as to set a benchmark for hundreds of thousands of workers in other sectors already without contracts or facing contract expirations in the coming months.

Trudeau and Treasury Board President Mona Fortier doubled down on the ruling class’ hardline stance this week. The Prime Minister made his most open threat to date of back-to-work legislation to criminalize the strike on Wednesday when he said, “The union is certainly very aware of Canadians’ impatience and they have to calibrate that carefully.” Fortier, for her part, arrogantly ordered PSAC negotiators to bring their demands in line with the government’s piddling pay offer of 9 percent over three years. Fortier also dismissed the workers’ job security demands, declaring that seniority could only be one among many factors in determining layoffs. Meanwhile, the corporate media is full of hysterical complaints about the supposed devastating consequences of remote work for “managerial rights.”

Despite Trudeau’s threat of a back-to-work law, his preferred option remains to use the unions to ram through real-terms pay cuts over rank-

and-file opposition. After all the PSAC and the CLC leaders are key supporters of the union/NDP/Liberal alliance that has served, behind a smokescreen of phoney “progressive” rhetoric, to advance the predatory objectives of the Canadian financial oligarchy. These include military rearmament, support for the US-NATO war on Russia, and the “profits before life” pandemic response that cost the lives of over 50,000 Canadians. This anti-worker alliance was ramped up just a month after the outbreak of the war when, at the unions’ urging, NDP leader Jagmeet Singh reached a “confidence-and-supply” deal with Trudeau to ensure his government has a parliamentary majority through June 2025.

PSAC offers no way forward for the strikers confronting a ruling class determined to make of them an example, so as to stanch the growth of worker militancy. Since formal bargaining began almost two years ago, the union has worked systematically to drag out the process and avoid calling a strike, even though the government provocatively sought to have the union censured for “unfair labour practices” for supposedly raising too many demands at the bargaining table. It was only with rank-and-file anger boiling over due to the lack of a pay raise since the start of the pandemic, rampant inflation, and the government’s insistence on a full return to in-person work, that PSAC felt forced to proceed with the job action. It has deliberately isolated the strikers, bringing only a few hundred workers to each picket line and making no appeal for solidarity strikes.

The rest of the union bureaucracy is just as hostile to the strike because it threatens to undermine their alliance with the Liberals and NDP. The second-largest CLC affiliate representing federal workers, the Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada, claims to stand with the strikers, but has agreed to submit its own contract to binding arbitration. Other unions have dispatched a handful of officials to briefly join PSAC picket lines to save face. However, they have made no effort to inform their members about the issues faced by the striking public sector workers or the consequences for all workers should their strike be defeated, let alone lifted a finger to mobilize them in a common struggle against capitalist austerity and wage cutting.

If PSAC and the union bureaucracy remains in control of the strike, only two outcomes are possible, and both would represent a defeat for the workers. The first is that PSAC President Aylward and his negotiators conspire with Fortier and the government to reach and ram through a rotten sellout deal. The second is that the government decides to adopt back-to-work legislation, to which PSAC would submit without a fight as the unions have done for the past 40 years.

The outcome of last November’s Ontario education workers strike is the exception that proves the rule. When the 55,000 Ontario education support workers forced their union to go ahead with a planned strike in the face of a draconian back-to-work law, it quickly gave rise to a province-wide movement for a general strike. The leadership of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and other major unions responded by striking a backroom deal with the hated Ontario premier, Doug Ford, to scuttle the strike in return for the government rescinding its back-to-work law. Having enforced Ford’s anti-strike edict by other means, CUPE connived with the Ford government to impose a below-inflation pay settlement on the low-paid education workers.

The only way for the striking federal workers to avert these two roads to defeat is by broadening their struggle to other sections of the working class, who confront the same problems of a massive erosion of real wages, attacks on benefits and conditions, and job cuts. This

requires the establishment of rank-and-file strike committees in every workplace to place control of the strike in the hands of the workers and allow them to democratically formulate their demands.

A key task of these committees will be to draw sections of workers across the country who are currently without contracts into the struggle. Some 600,000 Quebec public sector workers, including in education and health care, have been forced to remain on the job by their unions after their contracts expired at the end of March. Around 200,000 Ontario teachers have been labouring without contracts for close to eight months. All of these workers know first-hand how the reactionary collective bargaining system is used to smother their struggles and implement real-term pay cuts.

There is a real basis to broaden the struggle still further. The federal government workers’ strike is part of a global resurgence of the class struggle that includes mass protests and strikes in France against Macron’s pension reform, major strikes in Britain, and contract battles involving hundreds of thousands of workers in the US. Developing a unified international movement embracing all of these struggles and more must be made a conscious strategy of the rank-and-file committees.

The committees should also call for an immediate halt to bargaining with the government. There is nothing left to negotiate with a government that has ruled out any settlement that fails to conform to its below-inflation wage demand while wasting tens of billions on rearming the military and subsidizing big business. The only way to enforce wage increases that keep pace with inflation is through a mass worker-led counter-offensive to put an end to austerity and war.

This struggle is political and must take the form of an open repudiation of the union/NDP/Liberal government alliance. In opposition to the insistence of all these organizations that workers must accept the funnelling of society’s vast resources to meet the needs of the Canadian imperialist war machine and swell the profits of the banks and big business, workers must fight for a socialist and internationalist program. They must make a special appeal to their class brothers and sisters in the United States for a joint fight against the Canada-US imperialist alliance, which has wreaked death and destruction across wide swathes of the Middle East and Central Asia over the past three decades and is at the centre of Washington’s preparations for “great power strategic conflict”—that is world war with Russia and China. This movement must fight for the establishment of workers’ power so socio-economic life can be reorganized to fulfill social needs not maximize private profit.

Workers who agree with this strategy and wish to take up the fight for its realization should register today for the International May Day rally on Sunday, April 30 at 3 p.m. Eastern Time hosted by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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