

As Canadian government workers push to expand strike, union leaders stay silent on negotiating blitz

Keith Jones
30 April 2023

The leaders of the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) are keeping the more than 100,000 striking federal government workers in the dark as to their negotiations with the Trudeau Liberal government.

On Friday afternoon, the government presented what it called its “final offer” to four of the five striking bargaining units. The Treasury Board’s use of the term “final offer” is a barbed ultimatum. It is a scarcely veiled threat that the Liberal government will use an emergency back-to-work law to criminalize the now almost two week-long strike if union negotiators do not themselves surrender what remains of workers’ demands.

Yet rather than alerting federal government workers and the working class more broadly to the government’s strikebreaking plans, and acting on worker demands for the strike to be expanded, PSAC has fallen silent.

Around midday Sunday, almost 48 hours after the government tabled its “final updated comprehensive offer,” the union posted a perfunctory bargaining update on its website and social media accounts. It claimed that the negotiations since Friday had produced “some progress on our wage demands and job security,” and reiterated the union’s determination to “stay at the table” no matter how flagrant the government’s provocations.

Workers must be warned. The leaders of PSAC, the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) and the social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP)—all of them close political allies of the big business, pro-war, pro-austerity Trudeau government—are conspiring with it to bring a quick end to the strike and impose real wage cuts on federal workers.

Already last week, PSAC President Chris Aylward revealed that the union had rolled back its demand for 4.5 percent annual wage increases in a three-year contract retroactive to June 2021. The PSAC president also admitted that the union’s now abandoned demand for a 13.5 percent total pay increase over three years would itself have sold workers short, by providing pay “increases” below inflation,

which just last year soared over 8 percent.

Throughout the two-year negotiations, the Trudeau government has acted provocatively and treated workers’ demands with arrogance and contempt. Initially it proposed wage increases of little more than 2 percent per year in a four-year contract. Since the strike began April 19, the Treasury Board has touted a 3 percent annual pay rise—which would translate into a huge real terms pay cut—as a line in the sand that it will not cross.

Adding insult to injury, the Trudeau government has incited the same workers, whose demand for a right to work remotely it has dismissed as an intolerable infringement on “managerial rights,” to scab on the strike by working from home.

Big business, for its part, is adamant that the government must prevail and be seen to prevail over the federal government workers, so as to establish a wage-cutting benchmark for workers across Canada, public and private sector alike. This was spelled out in an editorial that the *Globe and Mail*, the traditional voice of the Bay Street banks and brokerage firms and a prize asset of Canada’s richest family, the Thomsons, published on the strike’s eve. Decrying the galvanizing impact federal workers’ wrenching of an “outsized settlement” from the government would have on all workers, “Ottawa,” the *Globe* declared, “needs to stick to its position for below-inflation wage increases.” The corporate media is no less adamant the government press ahead with “post-pandemic austerity.” By this they mean the diversion of funds from overstretched public services to financing the US-NATO war with Russia, a vast expansion of the Canadian Armed Forces’ fire power, and huge corporate subsidies to assist Canadian big business in becoming leaders in the high-tech industries that will anchor both green capitalism and a war economy. “Stand firm, Justin Trudeau,” screamed an editorial published Sunday by the *National Post*, a leading supporter of the Conservatives and their far-right populist leader Pierre

Poillievre.

The striking federal workers now confront twin threats.

The first is that PSAC bureaucrats, with the support of the CLC and NDP leaders, will enter into a sellout agreement, cooked up behind closed doors, and deny the workers the right to see, let alone vote on it until long after they have been corralled back on the job and demobilized.

The telltale hallmarks of such a betrayal are already in place. The workers' demands are being bargained away in secret. The union keeps insisting, as in Sunday's bargaining update, that "PSAC members want to get back to work and deliver the services Canadians depend on." The leaders of various CLC affiliates put in appearances at strike-support rallies, and blow hot air about "standing" with the striking workers, while doing precisely nothing to mobilize sympathy walkouts and other solidarity action.

The second threat is that PSAC and the labour bureaucracy will use the government's adoption of a strikebreaking law or even the impending passage of an anti-strike law as the excuse to short-circuit the struggle and order workers to return to work. Unions, including PSAC in 1991, have done so time and again over the past four decades. In such a case, Aylward, no doubt flanked by CLC President Bea Bruske, Unifor's Lana Payne and other top bureaucrats, will deplore the Trudeau government's actions as anti-worker. But they will insist that nothing can be done because the federal workers are "isolated" and within days, if not hours, of the strike's end will resume their close and highly-visible collaboration with the supposedly "progressive" Trudeau government.

The reality is, in so far as the federal workers find themselves "isolated"—that is find themselves alone confronting the Trudeau government and a ruling class baying for their defeat—it is the direct result of the bureaucratic union apparatuses and their NDP allies' sabotage and is their desired outcome. They have done everything to limit the strike, organizationally and politically, to a contract dispute within the framework of the state-designed, pro-big business collective bargaining system and the politics of the capitalist establishment. PSAC meekly accepted that the government deemed "essential" more than 45,000 of the 155,000 workers whose contracts it is currently negotiating, thereby legally barring them from striking. For the past week, its central demand has been that Trudeau must join the negotiations, as if it makes any difference whether the prime minister demands wage cuts face-to-face or, exercising the government's "managerial rights," does so remotely.

These twin threats can only be countered and defeated in so far as workers wrest the leadership of their struggle from the hands of the pro-government labour bureaucrats and

broaden their struggle by making it the spearhead of a working class counteroffensive against austerity and war and for secure, decent-paying jobs and social equality.

This requires that workers establish rank-and-file strike committees in every workplace, organizationally and politically independent of the union apparatus. These committees should demand an end to all secret talks, oppose any attempt to shut down the strike without workers having the right to study and vote on any tentative agreement, and immediately begin preparations to defy an anti-strike law.

Above all this means rallying support from workers across Canada and internationally. Objectively, conditions are more than propitious for doing so. The central demands of the federal workers—protection from raging inflation, increased job security, an end to contracting out, and the right to work remotely so as to achieve better work-life balance—speak to the needs of working people across Canada and around the world.

The defence of workers' rights to strike and organize for collective struggle is also a burning global issue. All the more so as the crisis of capitalism thrusts workers into struggle the world over from Sri Lanka and India to France, Britain and the United States.

The federal workers' strike underscores that workers face a political struggle. Are society's priorities to be subordinated to the capitalist elite's drive for profit and geostrategic advantage through wage cuts, the dismantling of public services, rearmament and war, or will the needs of working people, the vast majority and the producer of all society's wealth, prevail?

In making the federal workers' strike the spearhead of a working class counteroffensive, workers must repudiate the anti-worker union-NDP-Liberal government alliance, under which the labour bureaucracy has pledged to suppress opposition to the ruling class' agenda of war and austerity and keep the minority Trudeau government in power until June 2025. The development of a network of rank-and-file committees must be animated by the struggle to mobilize the working class as an independent political force fighting for workers power and the socialist reorganization of socioeconomic life in Canada and around the world.



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