Union orders striking Canadian government workers back on the job after reaching sellout agreement

Our reporters
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The Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) has abruptly terminated a week-and-a-half-long strike by almost 100,000 federal public sector workers, after reaching sellout agreements with Canada's Liberal government.

Early Monday morning, PSAC announced that it had reached tentative agreements for four bargaining units comprised of administrative, maintenance and emergency workers employed by Service Canada and many other federal departments. In the very next breath, the union ordered the striking workers to immediately take down picket lines and report for work as of 9 a.m.

Tens of thousands of other federal workers employed by the Canada Revenue Agency who walked out on April 19 alongside the "core" federal government workers remain on strike. But union and government launched a bargaining "blitz" later Monday. Clearly both the PSAC bureaucrats and the Trudeau Liberal government are anxious to snuff out the strike movement among federal workers, lest it link up with the hundreds of thousands of other workers across Canada seeking inflation-busting wage increases.

What has been revealed about the tentative agreements confirms the warnings made by the *World Socialist Web Site* in recent days. The union has abandoned the workers' demands, agreed to contracts that if ratified will impose significant real wage cuts, and is trumpeting as victories side-deals on remote-work and job security that mean workers will remain subject to the full tyranny of "managerial rights."

This sellout is in keeping with the intimate political collaboration among Canada's top union bureaucrats, the Liberal government, and the social democratic New Democratic Party (NDP) to enforce the interests of big business.

The PSAC press release announcing the strike's end touted a 12 percent pay "increase" over four years. In addition, workers are to receive a one-off lump sum payment of $2,500 this year, which the union says equates to 3.7 percent of an average salary. The proposed settlement thus essentially aligns with the 9 percent over three years demanded by the government, with the only difference being that PSAC has agreed to an additional year for the contract and thus an extended ban on strikes.

Even if one accepts the union's massaged figures of a 12.6 percent compounded pay increase over four years, this falls well short of the demand the union was making less than two weeks ago for a 13.5 percentage increase (before compounding) over three years—to say nothing of what workers need when inflation officially surpassed 8 percent last year and continues to rise at a 5 percent pace.

Even the union's official press release could only bring itself to describe the proposed wage increase, with the one-time lump sum payment included, as "closing the gap" on inflation.

Workers have reacted angrily on social media to PSAC's miserable climbdown. "Are we reading the same tentative agreement?" asked one outraged worker. "We're taking a pay cut over 4 years instead of 3 and there hasn't be any change regarding RTO (return-to-office/remote work). This is disheartening."

"Huge win with 12 percent over 4 years?" wrote another. "This is still 3 percent a year which they said before was their final offer! How is this a huge win? We can do the math."

"This is a huge win for TBS (Treasury Board Secretariat)," said a third. "A huge loss for PSAC members. I'm so disappointed."

PSAC's sabotage of the strike flows from the major role it plays in the trade union/New Democratic Party alliance propping up the Justin Trudeau-led minority Liberal government as it pursues the capitalist elite's class war agenda of war abroad and austerity at home. This alliance has served as the key mechanism for the suppression of working-class struggles as the Liberals have funnelled tens of billions of dollars to the military, bailed out the banks and big business to the tune of $650 billion during the pandemic, and slashed public spending.

The Liberal/union/NDP alliance was consolidated in March 2022, when, at the urging of the unions, NDP leader Jagmeet Singh entered a confidence-and-supply agreement to secure a parliamentary majority for Trudeau through June 2025. Singh insisted this was necessary to secure "political stability," i.e., the "stability" needed to intensify the onslaught on the working

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Speaking at a Monday afternoon press conference, Treasury Board President Mona Fortier gloated over the government having secured, as it had originally sought, a four-year agreement. The extension of the agreement until 2024 will bring “an additional year of stability and certainty,” she enthused. Fortier also boasted that the proposed settlement, which will cost the Treasury Board just $1.3 billion per year, was “less than half of the cost of PSAC’s original demands.”

Although the union leaders covered it up so as to bolster the anti-worker NDP-Liberal governmental alliance, Fortier’s comments made clear that the government had signalled to the PSAC leaders that if they didn’t rapidly wind up the federal workers’ struggle it would use a back-to-work law to criminalize the strike. Fortier observed that the tabling of the government’s “final offer” Friday was the point at which “things got moving” in the talks.

PSAC’s anti-democratic, dead-of-night termination of the “core” federal workers’ strike without any rank-and-file vote has left the Canada Revenue Agency workers to fight alone.

A close review of the union press release puts paid to PSAC President Chris Aylward’s hollow boast that the union gained ground on all major issues. In addition to the sellout on wages, no guarantee of a right to remote work, where applicable, was achieved.

All the government has conceded is that departmental managers will henceforth review remote working requests on a case-by-case basis rather than dismissing them en masse, and that there will be management-union committees at the departmental level to discuss management’s remote-work decisions. At Monday’s press conference, Fortier stipulated that this was a union-government side-deal, outside the contract, and that workers will not have the right to grieve decisions taken by management concerning remote work.

The job protections the union claims to have secured for workers with higher seniority are similarly flimsy to non-existent. All the parties have agreed is that they will submit a joint proposal to the Public Service Commission to “include seniority rights in the workforce adjustment process.” In other words, even if the unelected commission agrees to such a proposal, seniority rights will only be one factor among many when deciding on layoffs and therefore all but meaningless.

On privatization and contracting out, PSAC asserted that it has secured a firm protection against the expansion of the use of private contractors by the federal government. Language was agreed ensuring that “in the event of layoffs, PSAC members will not lose their job if they can perform the duties of a contractor already working with the federal government.” This will do nothing to prevent the hiring of new contractors and very little to protect government workers’ jobs, since all the employer will need do is argue that existing employees are not capable of performing the required tasks.

The imposition of real wage cuts on a group of workers who were only recently praised to the skies as “heroes” for keeping government services running during the pandemic underscores the ruthlessness with which the entire ruling elite is determined to impose the burden of the capitalist crisis on working people.

Throughout the strike, media outlets like the *Globe and Mail*, the mouthpiece of Bay Street, and the right-wing *National Post* rained abuse and scorn on the workers, and urged the government to “stand firm.”

The Trudeau government, which has sent over $8 billion in military and other assistance to the far-right Ukrainian government since the outbreak of the US-NATO war on Russia in February 2022, behaved provocatively throughout the two years of bargaining and once again made clear that if its union “partners” couldn’t end the strike on its terms, it would deploy the repressive apparatus of the state against the workers, beginning with an antistrike law.

PSAC’s betrayal of the strike demonstrates the correctness of the insistence by the WSWS that federal workers can only prevail in their struggle if they seize control of it from the hands of the union bureaucracy by establishing rank-and-file committees at every workplace. These committees must immediately launch a campaign to vote down the rotten tentative agreements and appeal to other sections of workers for a unified working-class-led counter-offensive against war and austerity.

This requires above all the establishment of the political independence of the working class from the Liberal/union/NDP alliance, which is the chief obstacle to the emergence of a mass movement aimed at establishing workers’ power and redistributing society’s resources to meet social needs rather than produce profits for the few.

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