Canada’s union-backed Liberal government intervenes to break BC dockworkers’ strike

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Are you a striking dockworker in British Columbia? ***Contact us here or fill out the form at the end of this article*** *to speak out anonymously on your working conditions and your views about how the strike can be won.* ***Under conditions where the Liberal government is moving to break the strike, it is all the more important that the ILWU gag order on workers be broken.*** *We are fighting for the development of rank-and-file committees to unite the struggles of dockworkers across North America and globally.*

Canada’s Justin Trudeau-led federal Liberal government announced late Tuesday that it is intervening to force an end to the 12-day strike by 7,400 West Coast dockworkers.

Invoking Section 105 (2) of the anti-worker Canadian Labour Code, Labour Minister Seamus O’Regan ordered a federal mediator, who has been leading talks between the British Columbia Maritime Employers Association (BCMEA) and the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), to draft the terms for a settlement of the dispute within 24 hours. The BCMEA and ILWU will then have 24 hours to accept or reject the government-dictated contract.

O’Regan’s move is a back-to-work law in all but name. In announcing the government’s circumventing of the normal collective bargaining process, the Labour Minister declared, “After 11 days of a work stoppage, I have decided that the difference between the employer’s and the union’s position is not sufficient to justify a continued work stoppage.” In other words, if the ILWU refuses to impose the big business/government-dictated settlement on its members, the Liberals will recall Parliament to criminalize the “unjustified” strike with strikebreaking legislation.

Striking dockworkers, their class brothers and sisters at US West Coast ports and workers across Canada must mobilize immediately to defeat this brazen attack on workers’ right to strike. Rank-and-file committees should be set up at each port to fight for the broadening of the strike in opposition to all efforts by the government and its union allies to shut it down. They must seize control of the strike from the ILWU bureaucracy, which has already indicated that it is likely to capitulate to the government-dictated agreement.

The ILWU Canada apparatus, led by President Rob Ashton, has refused to denounce the government’s intervention. It has said it will make no comment until the mediator submits his recommendations, a tacit acceptance of the government’s “right” to impose a rotten contract that incorporates the employers’ concession demands.

This, moreover, is in conformity with the union’s actions throughout the strike. Even while it denounced the BCMEA for predicating its bargaining strategy on government intervention and made a show of calling on Ottawa to “stay out” of the dispute, it never so much as broached the question of what workers should do to counter a back-to-work law.

O’Regan’s claim that the issues in dispute do not warrant the strike’s continuation is a flagrant provocation that tramples on dockworkers’ democratic right to determine whether or not job action is “justified.” The minister’s claim that a “good deal” is “within reach” is absurd on its face and underscores that the government stands fully on the employers’ side. The talks prior to and during the strike have been characterized by the BCMEA making outrageous demands and smearing the strikers as “overpaid and spoilt.” The association, which represents some 49 employers at BC’s 30 ports, wants to vastly expand the use of third-party contractors, so as to slash labour costs and further cut jobs through automation. It is also pressing for a massive real-terms pay cut, offering workers a 14.7 percent pay “increase” over four years. Five of the BCMEA’s member organizations are global giants who made whopping profits of more than C$100 billion in 2022 alone.

Confident of the government’s backing, the BCMEA arrogantly announced the suspension of talks on the third day of the strike. With the strike now approaching the two-week mark, its backers in the corporate-controlled media are citing reports of companies in the manufacturing and agriculture industries imposing production slowdowns to bolster their shrill demands that the government end the dispute immediately.

There are two benefits for the Liberal government in using Section 105 (2) to end the strike. First, the process is quicker than recalling Parliament and passing back-to-work legislation, which would take several days. If the ILWU capitulates to O’Regan’s proposal, workers could be back on the job as soon as Thursday evening. Second, the government can enforce the employers’ terms without having to deploy the full force of the state and thereby openly expose itself as a tool of big business and the collective bargaining system as a sham.

As the Liberals have done time and again since coming to power in 2015, they instead intend to use the services of the union bureaucracy to smother the class struggle and implement corporate Canada’s demands. At the same time, should the ILWU bureaucrats balk at imposing the proposed settlement, the Trudeau government retains the power to rush a strikebreaking law through Parliament as it did to crush a strike by 1,100 Montreal dockworkers in May 2021.

Under Section 108 of the Canadian Labour Code, O’Regan also has the option of forcing a vote on the government-dictated contract even if the ILWU rejects it, provided that the BCMEA endorses it.

In his comments Tuesday, O’Regan made clear that far more is at stake for the ruling elites in Canada and the United States than just the terms in a new collective agreement. “The scale of this disruption shows how important the relationship between the BCMEA and the

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ILWU is to our national interest. We cannot allow this work stoppage to persist and risk further damage to the relationship between these parties," he declared.

When O'Regan speaks of the "national interest," he means the interests of Canadian imperialism, which requires supply chains operating without disruption to pursue in alliance with US imperialism its agenda of war abroad and boosting "global competitiveness"—i.e., big business profits—at home. The ports on North America's Pacific coast are vital conduits for the raw materials needed to feed the armaments industry and for the weapons they produce and are therefore essential to the US and Canadian ruling classes as they wage war on Russia in Ukraine and prepare for war with China.

O'Regan's concern about the potential for "damage to the relationship" between the BCMEA and ILWU demonstrates how critical the corporatist partnership between the union bureaucracy, big business and the government is for the North American imperialist powers. Having consulted extensively with the Biden administration during the strike, O'Regan will be well aware of how the Democrats used their "relationship" with the union bureaucracy to block a strike by over 110,000 railroaders last December, which would have meant massive disruptions to supply chains and risked the disruption of the "war effort." He is also a member of a government that has repeatedly used its close ties to the union bureaucracy to suppress the class struggle, including most recently by enforcing a sellout agreement on 155,000 federal government workers after a two-week strike in April.

In his comments Tuesday, he made no secret of the fact that he views the union as a partner in imposing terms on rank-and-file workers, whose interests collide not only with the bosses but with the well-paid ILWU bureaucrats. The deal now being drafted by the federal mediator "would work for both the employer and the union," he said. The interests of the workers did not even merit a mention.

In its push to end the strike, the Liberal government has called on the services of Hassan Yussuff, the former president of the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), Canada's largest union federation. Yussuff participated in talks Monday evening in what was the first face-to-face meeting between the parties in over a week. He embodies the antiworker corporatist ties between the Liberal government and the bureaucracy.

As CLC president, Yussuff played a major role in renegotiating the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with the Trump administration to consolidate a US-led trade bloc aimed at challenging the continent's twin imperialist powers' strategic rivals. He was also instrumental in enforcing the ruling elite's homicidal "profits before lives" pandemic policy, including the deadly back-to-work campaign. For services rendered to the financial oligarchy, Trudeau appointed Yussuff upon his retirement from the CLC to Canada's Senate, the upper house of Parliament.

The deployment of Yussuff to Vancouver underscores the growing fear within ruling circles that unless the strike is brought to a swift end, it could act as the catalyst for a broader movement of workers across North America against capitalist austerity and the subordination of society's resources to waging imperialist war. On Monday, the BCMEA savagely denounced the ILWU's announcement that its US members would not handle containers rerouted from Vancouver for American ports, an indication of the employers' fear of any joint action of workers across the Canada-US border. "ILWU Canada leadership," thundered the BCMEA, "have even banded together with US west coast port workers who say they will refuse to work container ships that were rerouted from Port of Vancouver to Port of Seattle—further damaging the reliability and competitiveness of West Coast ports up and down the coast."

In fact, the ILWU's initiative proved largely ineffectual and was taken above all to placate the strong sentiments among rank-and-file dockworkers for a unified fight by North American port workers against the bosses. For security reasons, dockworkers and the ILWU do not receive information about containers on ships which allows shippers and their clients to relabel cargo while at sea to change its final port of destination. Two ships that arrived in Seattle Monday after being diverted from Vancouver subsequently announced that they would not return to Canada, a clear sign that the cargo was processed at Seattle or will be handled at another US port.

Throughout the strike, the ILWU has worked to keep American and Canadian dockworkers hermetically sealed off from each other. In close consultation with the Biden administration, the ILWU suddenly announced a tentative agreement for 22,000 American dockers last month just as their Canadian colleagues delivered a massive strike vote. The clear purpose of announcing the deal, for which ratification is being dragged out for many weeks, was to prevent a situation emerging in which a strike on both sides of the border occurred at the same time. US West Coast dockworkers have been kept on the job for over a year without a contract by the ILWU.

The unification of the dockworkers' struggle across North America is pivotal to defeating the Trudeau government's aggressive intervention to crush the strike. Striking BC dockers must appeal to their American brothers and sisters to join their struggle and broaden the strike to other sections of workers across Canada who have a direct interest in defeating the ruling class's ever-widening drive to abrogate the right to strike.

This struggle must be waged in a rebellion against the ILWU bureaucracy and its backers in the New Democratic Party, who are propping up the same Trudeau government that is now trampling on dockworkers' rights. What is posed is the need to develop a working class counteroffensive to defeat the ruling elite's agenda of austerity and war and its use of authoritarian methods and the force of the capitalist state to impose them.

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