

Canada's government moving to ban port strikes, as big business demands outlawing of job action by key "infrastructure" workers

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In response to last month's powerful 13-day strike by 7,400 British Columbia dockers, the federal Liberal government is moving to rob dockworkers of their democratic right to strike.

The recent dispute was ended when the Trudeau government successfully prevailed on the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) to impose a rotten, government-dictated contract on the workers. However, corporate Canada is demanding the government go much further to suppress worker opposition to austerity and war, and prevent it from developing into a mass movement that would threaten the stability of Canadian capitalism.

In a written statement released on the social media platform X (formerly Twitter), federal Labour Minister Seamus O'Regan announced August 9 that an immediate review would be initiated to identify "structural issues" during negotiations that led to the strike. Launched under Section 106 of the anti-worker Canada Labour Code, O'Regan declared that the goal of the government's review is to create "a harmonious working environment" between the union and employers in future collective bargaining, i.e. prevent further strikes.

Underscoring his government's disdain for workers' basic democratic rights, he warned ominously that "another dispute and disruption on that scale is still possible, and that's not good enough."

O'Regan's statement underlines that the union-backed Liberal government is making good on threats made earlier in the month, when O'Regan vowed that another port strike would not be tolerated. Following the anti-democratic four-year contract's ratification on August 4, he and Transportation Minister Pablo Rodriguez stated, "This dispute caused serious disruptions to our supply chains, risking our strong international reputation as a reliable trading partner. We do not want to be back here again."

The 13-day strike was launched by the 7,400 dockers to secure inflation-busting wage increases and protections against job cuts due to outsourcing and automation. It spanned 30 terminals in British Columbia, including Canada's first and third largest ports, where over \$800 million worth of cargo is handled each day.

The disruption of such a critical choke point in North America's supply chains provoked vitriolic attacks on the workers from the ruthless British Columbia Marine Employers Association (BCMEA)—whose members include the world's largest shipping

giants. A veritable *Who's Who* of corporate Canada representatives joined in, demanding that the federal government immediately criminalize the strike, some adding that the ports should be declared an "essential service" and the ban on worker job action made permanent.

Throughout the strike, the BCMEA slandered dockworkers as "greedy" and "unreasonable." The shipping giants represented by the BCMEA have raked in billions in exorbitant profits since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, while dockworkers have struggled with soaring inflation, lack of working hours and precarious working conditions. The BCMEA welcomed O'Regan's strike review as an "opportunity to modernize" the bargaining process.

The ruling elite's venomous attacks on dockworkers arise from its fear that their powerful struggle could encourage broader sections of workers to take a stand against decades of concessions on wages and conditions.

The denunciations of the dockers reached a frenzy after they voted down a rotten government-dictated contract despite it being recommended by the ILWU bureaucracy. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau himself asserted that the vote was "unacceptable," underscoring that as far as he is concerned, workers have no right to challenge the corporatist dictatorship of government ministers, employer representatives, and handsomely-paid union bureaucrats. The government relied on the unelected Canada Industrial Relations Board (CIRB) to force a second vote on virtually the same proposed agreement, with the ILWU bureaucracy unanimously recommending ratification.

Notwithstanding this bullying and intimidation, over one quarter of rank-and-file workers voted against the deal. This is a considerable number considering both that voting "No" meant accepting the challenge of a direct political confrontation with the Trudeau government and the union's manifest opposition to making any appeal for broader working class support, including from the 22,000 US West Coast dockers, also ILWU members, who are embroiled in a like struggle.

The union and NDP-backed Liberal government made clear its hostility to the dockworkers' strike from the outset, declaring it a threat to the "national interest." The struggle represented an objective challenge to Ottawa's imperialist war plans, by shutting down critical links in the supply chains used for the making and

export of the armaments needed to escalate the war in Ukraine and prepare for war with China.

The Canadian ruling class also saw it as an obstacle to its efforts to boost Canadian capitalism's "global competitiveness," that is its profitability, by intensifying the exploitation of the working class by imposing inflation-driven real wage cuts and using contracting-out and automation to slash jobs and impose speedup.

The Canadian Federation of Independent Business (CFIB) and the Canadian Chamber of Commerce are among the many big business lobby groups clamouring for the government to permanently eviscerate the right to strike for dockworkers and other sections of the working class. Both are calling on the government to provide "new tools" for labour disputes affecting transport infrastructure and supply chains. The CFIB is also urging the federal government to scrap its proposed anti-scab legislation, which would prohibit the use of replacement workers during a strike or lockout.

The ILWU union apparatus' betrayal of the port strike demonstrated the bureaucracy's complete indifference to the well-being of the workers they purport to represent and their basic democratic rights. During the strike it imposed a gag order to block workers from speaking out about their struggle. But as their efforts to run the strike into the ground and impose a sellout contract became ever more evident, their bureaucratic control began to breakdown and this found expression on the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The ILWU Canada leadership kept Canadian workers in a political vacuum, hermetically sealed off from their American colleagues, who face the same exploitative working conditions and the same threat of government intervention to dictate a settlement on the employers' terms.

Wedded to the Canadian state and to the "legality" of the anti-worker collective bargaining system on which its privileges rely, the ILWU bureaucracy has remained conspicuously silent on the Liberals' strike review announcement. This is because the trade union bureaucracy as a whole and its New Democratic Party (NDP) allies are part of a corporatist partnership with the Liberals and employers.

The NDP cannot be relied upon to act on its supposed opposition to any attack on workers' right to strike. Despite the oppositional rhetoric of NDP leader Jagmeet Singh that he will "never support" a back-to-work law, his party's key political function is to provide a left-fig leaf for the big business Liberals.

The NDP has been propping up the minority Liberal government since 2019. Last year, the NDP signed onto a confidence-and-supply agreement that will secure the Liberals' control of parliament through June 2025. Tellingly, the NDP has remained silent on O'Regan's strike review announcement and the serious threat to dockworkers' democratic rights that it represents.

The right to strike has been under systematic attack in Canada for decades. On dozens of occasions, federal and provincial governments of all political stripes, including the NDP, have imposed back-to-work legislation and criminalized worker job actions.

The big business Liberal party prefers to retain its democratic veneer while it pursues its reactionary class-war agenda of

imperialist war abroad and austerity at home by using its junior partners in the corporatist trade unions to suppress increasingly explosive worker opposition to the worst cost-of-living crisis in decades. The government's preferred mechanisms are the sham "collective bargaining process" or binding arbitration.

When all else fails, it will ruthlessly impose the dictates of corporate Canada through the criminalization of strike action, as it did in 2018, when the Trudeau government enacted the reactionary Bill C-89 to ban a strike by 50,000 federal postal workers. In 2021, the Liberals rammed a draconian law through parliament criminalizing a four-day strike by 1,150 Montreal dockworkers.

Last November, the hard-right Conservative Ontario government led by Doug Ford rushed Bill 28 through the provincial parliament to preemptively ban 55,000 education support workers from striking and impose a massive real-wage cut on them by government fiat. In doing so, Ford invoked the anti-democratic notwithstanding clause that allows the government to override constitutionally-guaranteed rights.

A courageous stand taken by the support staff, who won strong support throughout the working class, including calls for a general strike, compelled Ford to retreat and withdraw the bill. But the union bureaucracy, fearing a political rebellion by the workers that they would struggle to control, called off the strike immediately without achieving any of the workers' demands and helped the Ford government impose a concessions-filled contract.

The systematic attack on workers' right to strike is part of an international process. Throughout the port strike in British Columbia, Trudeau and O'Regan conspired with their US counterparts to crush worker opposition at West Coast ports on both sides of the border.

The Biden administration has played a central role in preventing a strike by US West Coast dockers. First, it prodded the ILWU into enforcing a year-long "voluntary" no-strike pledge. Then in June it intervened directly in the negotiations, prevailing on the union and the Pacific Maritime Association to announce they had reached a settlement even though important issues had yet to be resolved.

A key aim of this sell-out tentative agreement, whose details were kept under wraps into this month, was to prevent US dockers from being in a position to mount a joint struggle with and strike alongside their Canadian class brothers and sisters.

Last December, the Biden administration and US Congress stripped 115,000 railroaders of the right to strike. With the connivance of the unions, it imposed concessionary contracts that had previously been rejected, essentially enforcing a corporate dictatorship on working people.



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