

Strike by Canadian-based operators paralyzes St. Lawrence Seaway shipping

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23 October 2023

Some 360 engineers, operators, maintenance workers, supervisors and administrative staff walked off the job early Sunday morning, shutting down shipping through the St. Lawrence Seaway.

Organized in five separate union locals, the highly skilled workers, members of Unifor, are demanding a significant wage increase to protect against past and current wage erosion from inflation. Within a few hours of the strike's launch, business organizations were screaming for strikebreaking legislation from the Trudeau Liberal government, which criminalized a strike by 7,200 British Columbia dockers this past summer.

For Seaway management, wage protection against inflation was simply a bridge too far. There were, they arrogantly complained, "1,000 nautical miles" between their proposals and the workers' demands.

The workers oversee the operation of an extensive system of channels, locks, bridges and canals between Montreal and Niagara that allows for the transit of deep-water freighters on the Great Lakes/St. Lawrence River waterway from the western tip of Lake Superior through to ports in Quebec and then beyond. Last year, almost \$17 billion worth of foodstuffs, minerals and materials—nearly half of it grain and iron ore—passed through the seaway system.

Without a contract since March, the workers rejected a tentative deal presented to them by Unifor in late July. Reflecting the growing gulf between rank-and-file workers and the Unifor bureaucracy, the agreement was one of three contracts voted down by Unifor members across all sectors within the space of just two weeks in mid-summer. In the Greater Toronto Area, 3,700 grocery workers went on strike after soundly rejecting a miserable offer that had been promoted by the union as the "best deal in decades." And in Windsor, Ontario, 250 salt miners on strike since February stood firm and rejected an inferior contract offer, also recommended by the union.

The revolt by seaway workers comes on the heels of a bitter struggle by over 7,200 dockworkers at British Columbia's ports throughout July. The workers, members of the International Longshore Warehouse Union (ILWU), waged a courageous 13-day strike in the face of government threats to criminalize their job action. After Labour Minister Seamus O'Regan sought to dictate the terms of a settlement, the opposition among rank-and-file workers was so great that ILWU delegates were forced to vote it down. The ILWU leadership finally succeeded in ramming through a sellout contract in collusion with the Liberal government and port bosses amid threats of legislation to prohibit future strikes. Following the ratification of the contract, the Trudeau government convened an inquiry under the Canada Labour Code into the dispute, with O'Regan declaring that its goal was to create "harmonious working relations" so as to prevent like disruptions to the operations of the West Coast ports in future contract disputes.

When negotiations with the Seaway workers stalled in September, workers increased their pressure on Unifor to move toward an all-out strike. Last week, they voted by a resounding 99 percent for strike action. Unifor, in a statement this past weekend, had to admit that its reluctant authorization of the 72-hour strike notice on Thursday was a "drastic decision" taken due to "the depth of [membership] dissatisfaction and the imperative for a swift resolution to the ongoing disputes."

The dispute is already shaping up to be a major battle in the generations-long struggle of the working class to defend its democratic right to strike.

Within hours of the onset of strike action, the Canadian St. Lawrence Seaway Management Corporation, ostensibly "not-for-profit," applied to the Canada Industrial Relations Board to implement provisions of the anti-worker Canada Labour Code that require grain shipments to continue during a strike. The CIRB played a

central role in imposing the government-dictated contract on BC port workers this past summer.

The Canadian Federation of Independent Business (CFIB) and the Canadian Chamber of Commerce were equally quick off the mark in demanding that the federal government ensures that the Seaway remains fully operational. Both have been in the forefront of calls for back-to-work legislation whenever workers in a powerful economic position take strike action.

As has been seen in the bitter strikes by port workers in Montreal and earlier this year in British Columbia, and by rail workers at Canadian National Railways, the CFIB and the Chamber of Commerce act as the “front men” for an entire array of big business interests. The CFIB is now campaigning to further restrict the bargaining power of federally regulated workers involved in the supply-chain sector by calling on the government to designate them as “essential” workers and thereby permanently strip them of the right to strike.

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 New Democratic Party, have imposed back-to-work legislation and criminalized worker job action.

The big business Liberal party prefers to retain its democratic veneer, while it pursues its reactionary class-war agenda of military adventures 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 ruling class is keenly aware of the burgeoning economic crisis, the restlessness of the global working class and the centrality of imperialist military efforts to safeguard their profits. Said Seaway management President and CEO Terrence Bowles, “The stakes are high...In these economically and geopolitically critical times, it is important that the Seaway remains a reliable transportation route for the efficient movement of essential cargoes.”

The government’s preferred industrial relations mechanisms are the sham “collective bargaining process” overseen by a compliant trade union bureaucracy and a whole spider’s web of containment machinery, from government supervised conciliation and binding arbitration to “cooling off” periods and “essential-worker” designations. In the case of the ongoing 13-month-long lockout of longshore workers at the Quebec City port, the government has greenlighted the shipping companies’ use of scab labour.

When all else fails, the Liberals, like the Conservatives and NDP, will ruthlessly impose the dictates of corporate Canada through the criminalization of strike action. In 2018, 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.

These strikebreaking moves are part of a broader turn to authoritarian forms of rule by the ruling elite as it seeks to crush worker opposition to its policies of austerity and war. Last November, Doug Ford’s hard-right Ontario Conservative government rushed Bill 28 through the provincial parliament to pre-emptively 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.

In order to win their strike and ward off any government attempt to impose anti-strike legislation, Seaway workers must appeal to workers across Canada—who whether public or private sector have themselves invariably experienced decades of wage, benefit and job cuts—to join them in a working-class counter-offensive against austerity and war.

Public sector workers, dockworkers, rail workers, healthcare workers, construction workers, manufacturing workers, postal workers, and others are natural allies of the Seaway strikers, since they have all been the target of the ruthless clampdown on workers’ rights by governments at all levels, including dozens of back-to-work laws in recent decades.



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