

# Ottawa police arrest union leader in crackdown on strike by civilian employees at military bases

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Over 100 striking federal government workers picketed an entrance to the grounds of the Canadian Parliament in Ottawa last week to protest against the arrest of one of their union representatives and press for the resumption of negotiations in their increasingly bitter five-week job action.

Last month, 500 chronically underpaid support workers at armed forces bases and installations in Ontario and Quebec began a strike in pursuit of a significant wage increase, job security and a nationwide equitable pay grid.

The workers at the Bagotville, Montreal, St-Jean and Valcartier military installations in Quebec and those in Kingston, Ottawa, and Petawawa, Ontario are members of the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) affiliated Union of National Defence Employees.

The picketing at Parliament Hill followed the February 7th arrest of Alex Silas, PSCA's Regional Executive Vice-President in the National Capital Region. On that day, about 215 picketers spilled into the street, blocking traffic in front of the Department of National Defence's Joint Intelligence Operations Centre. The union had called a press conference in front of the building to provide reporters with a strike update.

But before Silas could even begin his report, Ottawa police moved in to handcuff and arrest him. Outraged workers immediately surrounded the police cruiser where Silas had been deposited, calling for his immediate release and preventing the patrol car from departing.

Police eventually managed to transport Silas to a police station where he was criminally charged with mischief, intimidation by blocking or obstructing a roadway, causing a disturbance by impeding, and counselling an uncommitted indictable offence. Strikers later arrived at the station to demand Silas' release. The union official subsequently tweeted that he was released late that same day. He will appear in court to contest the charges at a future date. "My arrest took place at a peaceful demonstration as part of a legal strike action of workers fighting for a fair contract," said Silas.

Over the course of the strike, Ottawa police have become increasingly aggressive as the employer—Canadian Forces Morale and Welfare Services—has mobilized strike-breakers to

replace work performed by the civilian support workers. Multiple police cruisers now appear at legally constituted union picket lines to intimidate the strikers and threaten them with arrest.

Union workers who are not involved in the strike have begun to organize solidarity pickets at other military installations. In Toronto, a demonstration in support of the strikers was held at the Denison Armoury Drill Hall. And earlier this month, outside of Montreal, hundreds of workers from Quebec Federation of Labour (FTQ) affiliates joined strikers to disrupt a parade of new recruits at the St-Jean Garrison.

Worker unrest at Canadian military installations has unsettled senior officials in governing circles at a time when opposition to the federal government's support of the genocidal attacks on a helpless population in Gaza by the Israel Defence Forces continues to grow among whole swathes of the population.

The police crackdown against the legal strike by the civilian workers comes at the same time that Ottawa police have stepped up oppressive measures against pro-Palestinian demonstrations and marches in the city. Even Ottawa municipal by-law officers have been mobilized as an auxiliary force to suppress the unrest. Anyone now using a megaphone at any demonstration within the city limits faces a \$490 ticket. Already, a number of spokespeople from official human rights organizations as well as pro-Palestinian activists have been ticketed. Silas was also one of those ticketed for the alleged offence.

The police have been emboldened to act so aggressively by all levels of government, which unconditionally back Israel's genocidal assault on Gaza and the suppression of any opposition to it. The ruthless repression meted out to striking workers and anti-genocide protesters stands in stark contrast to the kid-glove treatment extended by the political establishment to the far-right "Freedom" Convoy, which was allowed to occupy downtown Ottawa for almost a month two years ago in January and February 2022 to demand the scrapping of all remaining COVID public health measures.

The fascist Convoy, whose instigators explicitly called for the establishment of an authoritarian junta, was patronized by a

significant faction of the ruling elite who seized on it as a means to bull-dozer over public opposition to the elimination of all anti-COVID measures and to push establishment politics sharply to the right.

Its most prominent spokesman was the now far-right leader of the official opposition Conservative Party, Pierre Poilievre. The Trudeau Liberal government, which ultimately invoked the Emergencies Act to disperse the Convoy, adopted its program wholesale by junking all remaining pandemic measures with the support of the trade union-sponsored New Democrats. A subsequent Public Order Emergencies Commission endorsed the Trudeau government's unprecedented use of the draconian Emergencies Act and urged the strengthening of the state's repressive apparatus under conditions of mounting social unrest.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* correctly warned at the time, the use of the state's powers of repression, while ostensibly aimed at the far right, would ultimately be turned far more brutally against the working class.

Convoy leaders received a steady flow of information from sympathetic police and government officials from all levels including the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS). During Commission testimony, a RCMP report obtained by the CBC revealed that the police agency was aware of significant sympathy for the Convoy within its own ranks. "The potential exists for serious insider threats... [T]hose who have not lost their jobs but are sympathetic to the movement and their former colleagues may be in a position to share law enforcement or military information to the convoy protests," it warned.

Police sympathy for the far-right was clearly voiced in another "intelligence report" on the Convoy from the Ottawa Police Service, created by a Sgt. Chris Kiez. It consisted of an explicit justification for the Convoy occupation, based entirely on a political screed by right-wing media commentator Rex Murphy. Absurdly, the only "threat" identified by Kiez in his report was that of Islamic State! Kiez, it was subsequently discovered, had made repeated social media posts that repeated far-right canards. In one he railed against "teachers," calling them "the most vile of the left-Marxist set."

Ontario Premier Doug Ford, an erstwhile Donald Trump enthusiast, also helped block police action against the Convoy, while privately assuring its supporters that he was working to rid the province of all COVID mitigation measures. That is until big business demanded his government put an end to Convoy supporters' blockade of the Ambassador Bridge between Windsor, Ontario and Detroit, because it was crippling Canada-US trade.

The strike at several major military bases in Ontario and Quebec is a significant event. The workers are federal public servants but are not under the umbrella of either the Treasury Board or the Department of National Defence. Instead, they are employed by Non-Public Funds, a separate agency that oversees workers who are not part of the "core" federal civil

service. As a result, these workers bargain separately from the 155,000 PSAC workers in the core public sector and were not part of the contract settlement with those workers after brief strike action last spring.

The workers provide support to military personnel in financial planning, managing their insurances, recreational activities, warehousing and retail and food services. They are paid significantly less than their counterparts performing similar duties in both the private and public sectors.

PSAC officials have pointed out, for example, that shipping and receiving clerks at the Petawawa military base make only \$17.19 per hour, barely above the minimum wage. And that amounts to only half of the earnings paid to public sector workers doing similar duties in the core civil service.

Such discrepancies are common in virtually every area of comparison with core civil servants. In addition, significant pay discrepancies also exist amongst workers in the Non-Public funds sector itself, depending on what particular military base that they are employed at. The demand for an across-the board national pay-grid for similar work at all military bases stems from such gross inequities.

The stepped-up suppression of strike activities against the civilian military base workers cannot be separated from the assault on democratic rights on every front. The Trudeau government and entire political establishment are seeking to advance the interests of Canadian imperialism by supporting Israel in its war on the Palestinians, and participating in US wars and preparations for war against Russia, China and in the Middle East.

This orientation by the ruling class necessitates a response from the striking workers that breaks out of the limited "collective bargaining" framework imposed by the PSAC union bureaucracy through the establishment of rank-and-file strike committees. These committees must fight to win support for their struggle among other sections of workers and develop it as a political and industrial counter-offensive by the working class against capitalist austerity, war, and attacks on democratic rights, and for decent-paying, secure jobs for all.



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