Canada’s Conservatives back NDP-Liberal anti-scab legislation that undermines the right to strike

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Defying prevailing opinion among a substantial section of Canadian big business, the Opposition Conservative Party, led by the far-right MP Pierre Poilievre, joined in giving unanimous consent to a union-backed, Liberal-NDP sponsored anti-scab bill on its second reading in Parliament on Feb. 27.

Now in committee before a final vote after which it will head to the Senate, Bill C-58 would amend the Canadian Labour Code to limit the ability of federally regulated employers to use replacement workers during a labour dispute, while further limiting workers’ ability to strike. The limit on scabs would not apply to workers in the federal public service, under the argument that these workers are not replaceable.

Tabled by Liberal Labour Minister Seamus O’Regan and universally touted by the New Democratic Party (NDP), the bill has been boosted by the union bureaucracy as “historic” and a major advance for working people in Canada. It is possible that the Conservatives will change their stance on the final vote on the bill, but this would not block its passage in the House of Commons, where the minority Liberal Trudeau government enjoys a majority thanks to the backing of the NDP through their “confidence and supply” agreement.

The bill is seen by both parties and the union tops as a key component to patching up the Liberal government’s “progressive” credentials ahead of an impending election. It was part of the joint measures that the two parties agreed to when they forged their governmental alliance to provide, to use words of NDP leader Jagmeet Singh, “stability” following the outbreak of the NATO-instigated Ukraine war.

Beyond electoral considerations, the bill reflects the close corporatist relations between the state, union bureaucracy, and big business that prevail in Canada. Since coming to power in 2015, the Trudeau Liberals have developed unprecedentedly close ties with the union bureaucracy, whose cooperation in suppressing the class struggle is highly valued and sought by key sections of the ruling elite.

The unions have embraced the Liberals’ pro-war, pro-austerity agenda, and have been rewarded with strong representation in some of the government’s most important policy areas. For example, when the Liberals renegotiated the North American Free Trade Agreement with the fascist-minded US President Donald Trump to prepare the economic basis for the continent’s twin imperialist powers to wage war against their rivals, top union officials acted as semi-official government advisers. In return for the services he had rendered to the bourgeoisie, Canadian Labour Congress President Hassan Yussuff was appointed to the Senate by Trudeau upon his 2021 retirement from the leadership of Canada’s largest union federation.

“Today is a great day for workers and a bad day for big bosses who want to exploit those workers,” NDP leader Singh declared following the Feb. 27 vote. “This is a bill that gives workers the ability to negotiate for fair wages.”

The United Steel Workers (USW) leadership called last month’s unanimous consent vote a “significant step forward for workers’ rights in Canada.” And USW National Director for Canada Marty Warren explicitly welcomed the support of Poilievre’s Tories, declaring in a statement, “The vote on the anti-scab bill is an important victory for federally regulated workers. The all-party support is a recognition of the importance of this legislation…”

In his statement, Warren admitted that the bill contains provisions which would hinder and even outright block the ability of a significant section of workers to strike through their designation as “essential employees,” and that it will not come into effect until 18 months after it receives royal assent.

Ultimately the architects of the Liberal-NDP alliance see Bill C-58 as another tool in the hands of the state to regulate and limit the class struggle, as they strive to subordinate the working class to their policies of austerity at home and aggression and war abroad.

With the support of the unions, the NDP intends to tout this as a “victory” for workers. One that results from its backing for a reactionary government that is assisting Israel’s genocide in Gaza and plays a key role in NATO’s war against Russia in Ukraine. At home, the Trudeau government has urged the maintenance of high interest rates to impose the cost of rearmament and enriching the wealthy on working people through real wage cuts.

The Canadian Chamber of Commerce (CCC), Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters, and the Canadian Federation of Independent Businesses have all actively opposed the “anti-scab” legislation. The *Globe and Mail*’s editorial board, the mouthpiece of the Bay Street financial elite, stood up for the right of management to use scabs to ruthlessly break strikes and declared the bill “a terrible idea.”

After the February 27 vote, the CEO of the CCC, Perrin Beatty,

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bitterly complained, “bad news for Canada, for Canadian families, and for Canadian workers. This will exacerbate our productivity problem, further erode our global reputation, and keep us from simply getting things done.”

Poilievre, for his part, deliberately played coy, refusing to state clearly his party’s position on the bill. As polls underscore the widespread popular revulsion with the Trudeau government and the likelihood of a Conservative sweep if an early election were called, the leader of the Opposition has been making phony appeals to workers and reaching out a hand to the union apparatus, posturing as a “man of the people.”

Speaking last week before the Greater Vancouver Board of Trade, Poilievre, mimicking the lies of other far-right would-be autocrats like ex-British Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Donald Trump, declared, “When I’m prime minister, my obsession—my daily obsession—will be about what is good for the working class people of this country.”

In so far as Poilievre has gained traction for such reactionary phony appeals, it is above all due to the unions and NDP’s systematic suppression of the class struggle. They have isolated strikes, when they have been unable to prevent their breaking out, and imposed one sell-out contract after another, while politically subordinating the working class to the big business Liberal government and its agenda of austerity and war.

The lurch of official politics to the right, the promotion of identity politics by the Liberals and NDP, and the Trudeau government’s spearheading of savage attacks on workers to pay for war abroad are fueling growing hostility to the so-called “progressive” parties and trade unions. Their anti-worker record has created a political opening for Poilievre, long notorious for serving as former Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s attack dog, to preposterously present himself as an advocate of “working Joes.” No matter that Poilievre has a long record of supporting the use of emergency back-to-work laws to break strikes, vows to increase military funding by $20 billion per year to meet NATO’s 2 percent of GDP target, is promising to get “tough on crime” and is whipping up backward anti-LGBT sentiment.

The Conservatives are making demagogic social appeals on the question of continued high inflation and the housing crisis, while promising to axe the Liberal’s carbon tax, which Poilievre falsely presents as a main driver of inflation. The ability of the far-right Poilievre, who came to lead the party in the aftermath of the fascistic “Freedom” Convoy’s occupation of Ottawa which he stridently supported, to seek support from broad sections of the population underscores the real danger present in the current political situation. To the extent that the Liberal/NDP/union alliance retains its political stranglehold over the working class, the only beneficiaries from the deepening capitalist crisis and Canadian imperialism’s turn to imperialist war will be Poilievre and the political far right.

Poilievre’s open hand to the union bureaucracy makes clear that he is ready to continue their ever closer integration with the state. A model for this is seen at the provincial level in Ontario where Tory Premier Doug Ford has made inroads with the union bureaucracy, in particular among the construction trades. The unions in turn have worked to prop up Ford’s government, scuttling a developing general strike movement in late 2022 after the premier pre-emptively illegalized a strike and imposed a concessions contract on education support workers.

However, Poilievre would combine any outreach to the bureaucracy with the adoption of openly authoritarian forms of rule and brutal state repression. The Conservatives have repeatedly attacked the Trudeau government for not cracking down more harshly against the anti-Gaza genocide protests and are eager to put paid once and for all to any political taboo on the use of the “notwithstanding clause” to trample on democratic rights.

Since becoming leader, he has assiduously courted the most openly far-right forces, including the supporters of Maxime Bernier’s People’s Party, and made a point of championing *Rebel News*. It should not be forgotten that his political allies in the leadership of the “Freedom” Convoy advocated the creation of a military-style junta to eliminate all remaining COVID public health measures. Poilievre would have no hesitation in mobilizing such forces to use violence against a growing working class movement, including in opposition to Ottawa’s involvement in a rapidly developing third world war.

The debate over the anti-scab law makes clear that the workers confront an across-the-board conspiracy to suppress the class struggle from the far-right Poilievre to the social democratic NDP and their backers in the trade unions in the interest of capital. The passage of the anti-scab bill—rife with measures which further bind workers within the pro-business collective bargaining system—will not advance workers interests one step forward.

The working class must assert its own independent interests by fighting for a political break with the Liberal/union/NDP alliance, the chief obstacle to the mobilization of the working class against capitalist austerity and war. This requires the struggle to form rank-and-file committees in every workplace and neighborhood to break free from the nationalist union bureaucracies, which tie workers to the Canadian capitalist political establishment.

Workers must fight to develop ties with their class brothers and sisters across provincial and international borders. Above all, the advancement of workers’ interests requires the adoption of a socialist and internationalist perspective to guide the fight for the transformation of society to meet the needs of humanity and not private profit. This is the perspective which the Socialist Equality Party (Canada) is fighting for, and we strongly urge all workers to contact us today to join and help build it.

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