Over 9,300 Canadian railroad workers authorize strike action as soon as May 22

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Are you a railroader at CN or CPKC? We want to hear what you think of the current contract talks. Contact us here or fill out the form below.

Approximately 9,300 railway workers at Canadian National (CN) and Canadian Pacific Kansas City Ltd. (CPKC) have voted to authorize strike action as soon as May 22 if there is no tentative agreement reached between the companies and the Teamsters Canada Rail Conference (TCRC).

Locomotive engineers, conductors and yard workers at both companies have been working under an expired contract since December 31, 2023. A separate contract for CPKC rail traffic controllers is under renegotiation.

The vote was overwhelming, with 97.6 percent voting to strike at CN, and more than 95 percent of both groups at CPKC. This expresses the determination of rail workers to fight the corporate dictatorship, which forces them to labour in dangerous conditions to ensure ever greater profits for the corporate giants.

CN and CPKC each operate a vast rail network stretching across Canada from east to west and down south into the United States, in the case of CN, and Mexico, in the case of CPKC. The railways are critical to the Canadian economy for the export of grain, potash, wood products and coal, among other commodities, to the global market. Under conditions where it is waging war against Russia in Ukraine and preparing for war against China, Canada’s ruling elite will pull out all the stops to avert any disruption to its economic and military supply lines.

A simultaneous strike by rail workers at both companies would quickly bring the country’s economy to its knees and significantly impact the North American economy as a whole. For this reason, it is safe to assume that discussions are already under way between the trade union-backed Trudeau Liberal government and the Biden administration on how to scuttle the rail strike. Both governments collaborated behind the scenes last year to crush a strike by over 7,000 west coast dockers at Canadian ports and prevent the struggle from linking up with over 20,000 dockers at US ports. Earlier this year, Teamsters Canada president Francois Laporte attended a roundtable meeting convened at the explicit request of Biden with the US ambassador to Canada and Trudeau’s Labour Minister, Seamus O’Regan, to discuss “strengths and opportunities of labor relations in the United States and Canada.”

This record underscores that if the workers are to exploit the enormous economic leverage they have to win significant gains in relation to wages, working conditions and safety, they must recognize that they face a political struggle against the Trudeau government’s anti-worker program of war abroad and austerity at home.

The Teamsters bureaucracy has no intention of waging an all-out struggle and aims instead to reach an accommodation with the bosses in coordination with the New Democratic Party-backed Liberal government. Supported by their union allies, the Liberals have repeatedly forced workers to accept concessions through the use of back-to-work legislation or the threat thereof. Last year, the Trudeau government directly intervened to force a sellout on the striking BC dockworkers, whom they accused of endangering the “national interest.”

Paul Boucher, president of the TCRC, said in a statement announcing the strike vote results on May 1, “A simultaneous work stoppage at both CN and CPKC would disrupt supply chains on a scale Canada has likely never experienced. I would like to make it very clear that provoking a crisis on that scale has not been, and never will be, our goal. The reality is that we would very much like to avoid a work stoppage. With these results, we intend to go back to the bargaining table, work with federal mediators, and do everything in our power to reach a fair deal for our members. A deal that does not compromise on safety – or put profits over people.”

Who does Boucher think he is kidding? The Teamsters have not only “compromised” rail workers’ safety, but knowingly forced them to work in high-risk situations for many years. And anyone taken in by his commitment to put “people” ahead of “profits” should take a look at the top salaries of CN and CPKC management, and their bumper profits since the pandemic began.

Boucher’s brazen admission that a “simultaneous work stoppage at both CN and CPKC...has not been, and will never be, our goal” says everything that workers need to know about the character of the union bureaucracy. With their six-figure salaries and close ties to government, these bureaucrats fear the prospect of a unified struggle by rail workers more than
With no details as to the outcome of the vote forthcoming, many workers took to the Local 2004 Facebook page to express their disbelief at the outcome and their disgust over the sellout. “This is a huge loss for the workers,” wrote one worker, noting, “3% a year is a joke… the new benefit plan is awesome but WE are the ones who pay for it… CN are bullies when it comes to their employees.” Another worker noted, “Embarrassed, production gets screwed again.” “Once again CN wins,” remarked another.

Safety concerns repeatedly raised by rail workers were tragically highlighted last month when 36-year-old CN Rail maintenance worker Juver Balmores, a father of three, was killed in a head-on collision with a semi-truck on a notoriously deadly freeway between Kamloops and Clearwater, British Columbia. A passenger in the semi was also killed in the crash with the rail truck Balmores was driving.

During the 2022 contract struggle, CP Rail workers formed the CP Workers Rank-and-File Committee to advance the interests of workers independently of the union bureaucracy, organize opposition to a sellout by the Teamsters and provide a path forward against the corporate-union-government conspiracy. This tripartite alliance seeks to keep workers constrained within Canada’s highly restrictive “collective bargaining” system to block all opposition to its policies of intensified worker exploitation and the subordination of all society’s resources to the waging of imperialist war.

Workers at CN and CPKC must develop this work in the latest round of talks by building rank-and-file committees on every line and in every rail yard and shop from coast to coast. These committees must take control of the contract struggle and put power back in workers’ hands so they can wage a counter-offensive against the rail profiteers and their backers in government. A united struggle by Canadian rail workers will necessarily require its expansion across national boundaries to their brothers and sisters in the US and Mexico. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) has been established for this purpose. All those at CN and CPKC ready to take up this fight can contact the IWA-RFC here or fill out the form below.