

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

anything else.

Such a struggle could serve as a catalyst for a broader working-class movement that would challenge the pro-war, pro-austerity agenda backed by Trudeau and his union allies and quickly escape their suffocating control. More than 12,000 TTC transit workers in the Greater Toronto Area are in a position to strike after approving action at the end of March. The TTC workers union leadership in ATU Local 113 have deliberately dragged their feet, refusing to set a strike deadline. All of this is taking place in a politically explosive context, with student occupations spreading across the country to protest Canada's complicity in Israel's genocide against the Palestinians.

During the last round of talks at then-CP Rail in 2022, the Teamsters refused to set a strike date, despite an overwhelming vote by 3,000 engineers, conductors, and yard workers. They allowed management to take the initiative and lock workers out for several days. CP chief executive Keith Creel and the corporate media waged a vicious campaign against the workers, denouncing them for interrupting supply chains just weeks after the US-provoked Russian invasion of Ukraine. When it became clear that the government was preparing to intervene directly to impose a pro-employer settlement, the Teamsters spared Trudeau's blushes by agreeing to a binding arbitration process that excluded almost all of the workers' key demands. A union-backed contract was then imposed by a federal arbitrator in August of that year, which relegated workers to a real term pay cut amid high inflation, and perpetuated back-breaking and life-threatening working conditions.

CP Rail subsequently merged with Kansas City Southern in April 2023, creating CPKC, a 20,000-employee operation connecting Canada, the US and Mexico in a continent-spanning 32,000 kilometer rail network. The company posted a profit of \$3.9 billion in 2023 and Creel pulled in \$20 million in total compensation for the year.

Meanwhile CN, which was government owned until it was privatized in 1995, turned a profit last year of \$9.2 billion. This was down slightly from its 2022 profit of \$9.5 billion, disappointing investors who hope to see the railway squeeze even more from workers. CEO Tracy Robinson, named Railway Age's 2024 "Railroader of the Year," promised company shareholders in January that "our pivot to profitable growth is under way." She is guaranteed an annual income of \$14 million.

With rail workers across Canada determined to wage a serious fight against these corporate behemoths, the United Steelworkers (USW) union announced on April 29 that it had pushed through a three-year sellout contract covering nearly 3,000 track and bridge maintenance workers at CN in USW Local 2004, which limits wage growth to just three percent per year. The deal undercuts the struggle of those who run the trains, with CN boasting that the contract will allow them to boost productivity—which in plain terms means increased exploitation of workers.

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.



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