

CN and CPKC lock out 9,300 workers at Canada's two main railroads

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Some 9,300 engineers, conductors, yard workers, and rail controllers at Canadian National (CN) and Canadian Pacific Kansas City (CPKC) were locked out at 12:01am Thursday by Canada's two freight railroads, which are determined to impose sweeping concessions.

The overwhelming support among rail workers for a struggle to put an end to dangerous working conditions must be organized into a political fight against the rail barons, who are backed to the hilt by corporate Canada and the pro-war, pro-austerity Trudeau Liberal government.

Demonstrating the immense social power exercised by the rail workers, they would have brought freight rail services across Canada to a standstill if they had walked out on strike as planned.

The fact that the companies had the opportunity to lock workers out on their terms and organize a planned shutdown of the rail network was above all due to the hostility of the Teamsters Canada Rail Conference (TCRC) to organizing any genuine struggle. The TCRC issued a 72-hour strike notice at CPKC on Sunday, but only after both railroads served notice that they would lock out the workers at 12:01 am August 22.

The lockout has also halted passenger services in Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver that rely on CPKC controllers and tracks to operate. In addition, shipments to the US have been hit.

In a replay of contract talks in 2022, the TCRC has sat on massive strike votes without offering any strategy to beat back the railroads' concessions demands. In so doing, they have allowed the bosses to go on the offensive, while smearing the workers in the pro-corporate press as the real problem. What's more, the TCRC underscored its determination to divide the workers with its decision to only file a strike notice at CPKC.

Corporate Canada is demanding with one voice that the Trudeau government intervene to enforce a contract settlement. They view the railroads as a critical network stretching across North America for the supply of raw materials and finished goods for industry and food processing, the transportation of exports, and delivery of military equipment for the waging of imperialist war around the world. Business associations denounced the prospect of a strike as a threat to economic stability, national security and Canada's global reputation as a

trading partner.

A joint statement by the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, Business Council of Canada, Canadian Federation of Independent Business and Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters issued Wednesday declared, "The government of Canada has a responsibility to protect the Canadian public and maintain national security, and it is time to act decisively to fulfill that obligation."

The associations demanded the invocation of Section 107 of the Canada Labour Code, a provision used last year against West Coast dock workers to block their strike. Section 107 allows the government to order the Canada Industrial Relations Board (CIRB), an unelected body of government appointees who invariably rule in favour of the employers, to illegalize a strike and impose binding arbitration. In the event of binding arbitration, workers are stripped of any right to determine their own working conditions and lose any legal right to carry out a job action until the future arbitration-imposed contract expires. The business associations also indicated they would support a back-to-work law passed by parliament, which the government would need to recall from its summer recess.

The Trudeau government has thus far rejected open and direct intervention, although Labour Minister Steven MacInnon has participated in the contract talks with both companies this week. MacInnon issued an August 15 statement rejecting an appeal from CN for him to impose binding arbitration.

This initial reluctance in no way implies any principled opposition by the union- and New Democratic Party-backed Trudeau government to openly intervening on the side of the bosses and robbing rail workers of their legal rights to strike and bargain collectively.

In fact, in their almost nine years in power, the Liberals have time and again used the full force of the state to crush workers' struggles. Some examples include the banning of rotating strikes by 50,000 postal workers in 2018, the criminalization of a Port of Montreal work stoppage by 1,100 dockers in 2021, and the banning of last year's dockworkers' strike. The government would prefer to rely on the services of its allies in the Teamsters bureaucracy to ram a concessions-filled deal down the workers' throats, but it will act ruthlessly should this prove impossible.

CN's continent-wide network connects Newfoundland & Labrador in the east with Vancouver on the Pacific coast, while CPKC's tracks stretch across Canada, through the United States, and down into southern Mexico. The Biden administration is heavily involved behind the scenes due to the impact a strike would have on the North American economy and the ruling elite's fear that a stand by railway workers could rapidly spread across the border, acting as a catalyst to unite Canadian and American workers in a joint fight against capitalist austerity and war. US Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg wrote on X Wednesday, "We are engaging with our Canadian counterparts and tracking the flow of vital goods to U.S. consumers and businesses."

Earlier this year, leaders of Canada's major unions, including Teamsters Canada President François Laporte, met with the US ambassador to Canada, David Cohen, and then-Labour Minister Seamus O'Regan to discuss "the strengths and opportunities of labor relations in the United States and Canada." In other words, they were conspiring on how best to suppress the class struggle under conditions in which workers across North America, irrespective of the economic sector in which they operate, are objectively united by the process of production more than ever before.

This is especially true of the rail industry, where profit-hungry rail companies rampage across the entire North American continent in search of the biggest returns for their shareholders. Conditions in Canada and the US for rail workers are notorious, with frequent derailments claiming the lives of rail workers and local residents and causing environmental calamities. One can recall in this regard the horrific destruction of downtown Lac-Mégantic in 2013, the Field derailment in British Columbia in February 2019, and last year's derailment of a Norfolk Southern train carrying a toxic cargo in East Palestine, Ohio.

The railroads are making demands that ensure the continuation and increased frequency of similarly terrible, but entirely preventable, accidents in the years to come. TCRC President Paul Boucher stated that CN wants to extend already notoriously long workdays for rail workers in provinces west of Ontario and impose a relocation policy to meet labour shortages that could force workers to move away from their homes for up to 90 days. Paying workers by scheduled shift rather than miles travelled could result in rail workers being assigned to other tasks if they reach their destination ahead of time, rather than being able to clock out as they can currently. These concessions, he acknowledged, would "drag working conditions back to another era."

Demands from CPKC include more flexible working arrangements that would make it harder for workers to know when they will be called to work, producing, in Boucher's words, a "fatigue-related safety risk," and would loosen restrictions on how long workers can be held away from home. CPKC also wants to delay the start of "held-away pay,"

payments that workers receive when they spend time away from home between shifts. The change would be in line with extended breaks mandated by a May 2023 law that requires a minimum rest period between shifts when rail workers are away from home for 12 hours.

The TCRC offers no way forward for workers to resist these outrageous demands. It has presided over massive concessions in every recent bargaining round, and it intends to do the same again this time. The very fact that the companies are in a position to lock out the workers as they take strike action is primarily the result of the Teamsters' foot-dragging and their refusal to challenge the anti-worker collective bargaining regime enforced by their allies in the Liberal government.

In 2022, the Teamsters waited until Canadian Pacific locked out the workforce before calling a strike. And no sooner did the strike begin than the union caved in and, at the government's urging, agreed to a binding arbitration process that resulted in virtually all of the companies' demands being written into the contract.

The Teamsters bureaucracy has no desire to lead a struggle at a time when the prices of commodities are high and the shipping of war materials to the US/NATO-instigated war on Russia is in full swing. This is because the union apparatus in the Teamsters and all other major unions is fully committed to Canadian and US imperialism's wars through their corporatist alliance with big business and the government.

Workers must take matters into their own hands by forming rank-and-file strike committees to broaden their struggle. It must be broadened to rail workers in the US and Mexico to bring the entire North American railroad network to a halt. It must also be broadened to other sections of the working class across Canada, including autoworkers, resource workers, and workers in the public sector, all of whom confront sweeping attacks on their pay and conditions from the same forces seeking to impose concessions on railroaders.

In opposition to the nationalist and pro-capitalist Teamsters bureaucracy, whose main concern is defending the interests of the corporations and government against the workers, rank-and-file CN and CPKC workers must fight for a socialist and internationalist program to secure safe and secure jobs for all, an end to public spending austerity, and a halt to imperialist war.

On this basis, the railroads can be deployed to serve the needs of the vast majority of society, the working class, not the profiteering and warmongering of a tiny few at the top.



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