

Canada's Liberal government colludes with White House to shut down rail strike

Roger Jordan
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Canada's Liberal government, working hand in glove with the Biden administration in Washington, has banned strike action by 9,300 rail workers at Canadian National (CN) and Canadian Pacific Kansas City (CPKC). After the two railroads locked out the workers at 12:01 a.m. Thursday, the government announced later in the day it would impose binding arbitration, robbing workers of their rights to bargain the terms of their contract and take strike action.

Labour Minister Steven MacKinnon ordered the railroads to resume service and invoked Section 107 of the Canada Labour Code, which allows the government to order the unelected Canadian Industrial Relations Board (CIRB) to dictate the terms of new collective agreements. The CIRB was also authorized to arbitrarily extend the previous agreements until new contracts are finalized.

This amounts to a government-sanctioned dictatorship of the rail bosses, who will get everything they want from the CIRB. It is in keeping with the systematic suppression of workers' struggles over recent years by the Canadian capitalist state, whose defenders lyingly present it as a gentler, more "progressive" alternative to the United States.

Major interventions by the state have included the banning of the postal workers' strike in 2018, the Montreal dockers' strike in 2021 and the strike by West Coast dockers last year. In 2022, the Ontario provincial government invoked the anti-democratic "notwithstanding" clause, which permits governments to violate constitutionally protected rights at will, to outlaw a strike by education support workers.

The Trudeau government is also following in the footsteps of the Biden administration, which banned a rail strike in late 2022 to ram management's dictates down the workers' throats.

The Teamsters Canada Rail Conference (TCRC), the bargaining agent for the rail workers, was instrumental in preventing a strike. It sat on massive strike votes for months.

Only when the official lockout announcements were issued by CN and CPKC did the TCRC file a token strike notice at CPKC. The TCRC acted in this way because the bureaucrats were all too aware of the immense social power the rail workers possess to bring the economy to a grinding halt and wanted to prevent them from using it.

In banning the strike, Ottawa is defending the profits of the railroads and Canadian big business. Canada's two freight railroads transport 70 percent of intercity ground freight and half of the country's exports on their networks. In 2023, CN and Canadian Pacific accounted for more than US\$25 billion in operating revenue. These profits are made through intolerable levels of exploitation, expressed in frequent tragic accidents and massive levels of overwork.

The criminalization of the rail workers' struggle was coordinated between Ottawa and Washington, with the Biden administration apparently forcing the issue at the decisive moment. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg posted on X Wednesday that the administration was "engaging" with Ottawa over the impending lockout, which would have significantly disrupted trade with the US, as well as freight shipments within Canada.

In other words, Washington was demanding a resolution. Twenty-four hours later, MacKinnon duly obliged by announcing the Liberal government's strike ban.

American imperialism and its Canadian partner wanted a swift end to the struggle first and foremost for economic and geostrategic reasons. CPKC, formed out

of a merger last year between Canadian Pacific and Kansas City Southern, operates a transnational system stretching from Canada's Arctic Circle through the United States and to the south of Mexico.

Canadian National Railway Company's (CN) network is similarly expansive, reaching American ports on the Gulf Coast. They both play key roles in US-dominated North American supply chains, which Washington is using as a base of operations for conflict with its main rivals, especially China. Ottawa, as it has for decades, serves as Washington's junior imperialist partner.

In calling the strike a threat to "national security," Canadian big business acknowledged the fact that it was a threat to this strategy.

The strike ban is part of worldwide attack on the democratic rights of the working class. Global society is riven by social inequality and dominated by mounting popular anger towards the discredited political establishment in each country.

The attack on democratic rights is also bound up with criminal wars abroad backed by the US and its Canadian ally, including the genocide in Gaza and the proxy war against Russia.

A key instrument in this policy is the trade union bureaucracy, which is acting to block or sabotage resistance in the working class. Last month, Biden called the AFL-CIO in America my "domestic NATO."

Trudeau could say the same about his allies in the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), which is in an alliance with the Liberal government and the social democrats of the New Democratic Party (NDP). While the NDP guarantees the Liberals a majority in parliament, the unions ensure "labour peace" outside by confining all workers' struggles to the suffocating framework of "collective bargaining."

The strike ban is fresh proof that the working class is not just in a fight against corporate management but also against a political system controlled by the corporate oligarchy.

The key question, therefore, is the fight for the independence of the working class from the whole framework of labor control. While government ministers, corporate executives and their union lackeys claim that workers must accept state-dictated contracts to enrich the corporate elite and fund imperialist wars,

rail workers and their colleagues throughout the working class must fight for the social rights of all workers to a decent-paying and safe job, and well-funded social programs.

Rail workers can turn to a powerful movement among the international working class that is already well underway. Over 17,000 workers are currently on strike at AT&T across the Southeastern US, while opposition is brewing internationally at Stellantis plants to the jobs bloodbath in the auto industry. And the contract for US railroaders once again comes up for renegotiation at the end of the year.

Unifying these struggles requires the development of new forms of organization—rank-and-file committees, under the control of workers themselves and opposed to the nationalist, pro-capitalist union bureaucracies.

The building of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), with strong contingents of rail workers and workers from throughout key industries, will create the conditions for the political mobilization of the working class against corporatism and war and for workers' control over production and distribution.

Above all, a political party must be constructed capable of providing the revolutionary socialist leadership necessary to prevail in the direct confrontation with the ruling elite's program of capitalist austerity and war.

That party is the Socialist Equality Parties in Canada and the US, which fight to arm the growing upsurge of the working class around the world with a socialist and internationalist perspective for workers' power.



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