

Teamsters union scuttles Canadian rail workers' struggle in response to government strikebreaking

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The Teamsters Canada Rail Conference (TCRC) has cravenly surrendered to the Trudeau Liberal government's strikebreaking, scuttling a militant struggle of 9,300 engineers, conductors, yard workers and rail controllers at the Canadian operations of the Canadian National (CN) and Canadian Pacific Kansas City (CPKC) railways.

No sooner had the Canada Industrial Relations Board (CIRB)—acting on the express orders of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his Labour Minister, Steven MacKinnon—used its arbitrary powers to strip the CN and CPKC rail workers of their legal rights to strike and collectively determine their contracts, than the TCRC leaders announced their full compliance.

In accordance with the CIRB's orders, the TCRC instructed workers at CPKC to immediately end strike action and report for work starting at 12:01 a.m. EDT Monday. It also rescinded a 72-hour strike notice against CN that could have seen CN workers off the job as of Monday afternoon.

As per the CIRB's orders, the contacts for the 9,300 CN and CPKC rail workers will be dictated, as the railways have been demanding, by a state-appointed arbitrator. Moreover, until the binding arbitration process is complete and new contracts are in force, all job action by the rail workers has been declared illegal. This means that the workers have been robbed of their supposedly constitutionally-protected right to strike for years hence, since under Canadian labour law all worker job action is illegal until their contract has expired and workers have to jump through a series of legal hoops designed to hobble their power when they are in a position to strike.

The TCRC leadership had fiery words for the CIRB's order. "It signals to corporate Canada," said TCRC President Paul Boucher, "that large companies need only stop their operations for a few hours, inflict short-term economic pain and the federal government will step in to break a union."

However, this was all bluster. Boucher made clear the only action the union intends to take to oppose a frontal assault on its members at Canada's two principal railways, one that it concedes diminishes the rights of all workers across Canada, will be to challenge the constitutionality of the CIRB's order in a years-long process in the capitalist courts.

The Teamster union bureaucracy's capitulation was entirely predictable. So too was the complicity of the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) and the union-sponsored New Democratic Party (NDP), which is in a governmental alliance with the minority Liberals, providing them the votes they need in parliament to retain power.

The CLC did not even issue a press release to condemn the government strikebreaking, let alone lift a finger to mobilize any of its more than 3 million members in support of the rail workers.

From the very outset of negotiations, it was manifestly evident that the rail bosses intended to use the big business Liberal government to impose their concession demands, that all of corporate Canada supported their call for preemptive government action to prevent any rail strike, and that Trudeau would do their bidding.

Rather than responding to this by preparing for an all-out industrial and political struggle against CN and CPKC, corporate Canada and the Trudeau government, the Teamsters' leadership did everything in its power to demobilize, divide and isolate the railway workers.

Both CN and CPKC are among the five largest railways in North America, with networks stretching deep into the US and, in the case of CPKC, into Mexico. A joint strike against CN and CPKC would have rapidly paralyzed much of the Canadian economy and crippled the movement of resource products, manufactured goods and war materiel in much of the US.

Furthermore, the rail workers' struggle was developing amid a growing upsurge of worker struggles across Canada and the US, as workers fight for inflation-busting pay increases and an end to decades of contract concessions, including the gutting of pensions and working conditions.

That the CN and CPKC workers were in an extremely powerful position only made the Teamsters apparatus on both sides of the Canada-US border more determined to sabotage their struggle.

While the rail bosses closely coordinated their actions, pressing almost from the get-go for government intervention and announcing they would impose a lockout at the earliest

opportunity, the union worked to prevent CN and CPKC workers from using their power to jointly shut down Canada's railways.

It proposed staggered negotiations, with different strike/lockout deadlines for the two companies, only to have the proposal refused by the employers.

Then when the two railways announced their intention to impose a lockout starting last Thursday, the TCRC countered by serving the requisite 72-hour strike notice against only CPKC.

Consequently, when Labour Minister MacKinnon announced some 17 hours after the lockout had begun that the government was ordering the CIRB to strip the railway workers of their rights to strike and decide their contracts, and CN announced it was lifting its lockout, the TCRC—ever eager to abide by the anti-worker provisions of the labour code—immediately instructed the CN workers to return to work.

Nor did the TCRC, Teamsters Canada, or the International Brotherhood of Teamsters led by Sean O'Brien make any attempt to rally support either before or after the Trudeau government's strikebreaking from the tens of thousands of Teamster members who work for Class 1 US railroads, including at the US operations of CN and CPKC.

Less than two years ago, the Teamsters and the other rail unions in the US similarly played possum when the Biden administration and the Democrats and Republicans in Congress conspired to ram through legislation stripping US rail workers of their right to strike after they had balked at accepting concessionary contracts.

While the Teamsters and the other rail unions were working to keep US and Canadian workers divided from one another although they face common conditions and are part of a continental industry, the Trudeau government was in constant contact with the White House as to how and when the job action at Canada's railways would be ended.

Far from defending workers' interests, the unions are hostile to class struggle and led by a privileged bureaucratic caste that vehemently upholds the employers' "right" to profit and the geostrategic interests of North America's twin imperialist powers. This finds its political expression in the close ties between Teamsters' Canada, the CLC and the unions as a whole with the pro-war, pro-austerity Trudeau Liberal government and the US unions' alliance with the Democratic Party (although the Teamsters' O'Brien is cozying up to the Republican fascist Donald Trump).

As a result, rail workers now face the prospect of dictated contracts that will impose the companies' demands. Both railroads are intent on further lengthening the working day and imposing schedule regimes that will keep workers at their beck and call, destroying work-life balance and jeopardizing worker and public safety. Recent years have seen numerous derailments due to overwork and de-manning. CN is also trying to gain the power to move workers to far-flung locations for

months on end to fill labour shortages.

Before the CIRB, lawyers for the TCRC argued that government's bid to rob rail workers of their rights by invoking Section 107 of the Canada Labour Code was unconstitutional. This section, which the Liberal government has now thrice used to torpedo workers' struggle in the last year, empowers the Labour Minister to order the CIRB to "do such things as to the Minister seem likely to maintain or secure industrial peace and to promote conditions favourable to the settlement of industrial disputes."

The unelected, pro-employer CIRB brushed aside the Teamsters' legal arguments, giving its rubber stamp to a Labour Code provision that provides the minister and government quasi-dictatorial powers.

"[C]onsidering the clear statutory language contained in section 107 of the Code," wrote CIRB Chairperson Ginette Brazeau, "the Board has concluded that, in this case, it has no discretion or ability to refuse to implement, in whole or in part, the minister's directions or to modify their terms."

If workers are to develop a counter-offensive against the ever-expanding employer-state assault on their jobs, working conditions and rights, they must build new organizations of class struggle and adopt a new political strategy based on the international unity of the working class and refusal to subordinate workers' needs to the imperatives of capitalist profit.

The rail bosses are intent on returning workers to the type of brutal work regime that existed more than a century ago. To counter this, prepare to defy the diktats of the government-appointed-arbitrator, and forge the bonds of fighting unity with rail workers and other workers across North America necessary to defeat the state attack on workers rights, workers need to build rank-and-file-committees independent of and in opposition to the national-capitalist politics of the Teamsters, Unifor and other rail unions.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and Socialist Equality Party will offer its full support and assistance to workers taking up this fight.



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