

Air Canada pilots vote massively in favour of strike action

Carl Bronski
28 August 2024

Hundreds of Air Canada pilots held informational pickets at the company's major airport hubs in Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg and Vancouver on Tuesday afternoon to highlight their contract demands and the looming threat of a possible all-out strike as early as September 17. The demonstrations followed on from last week's announcement of an overwhelming 98 percent strike vote by the pilots at Canada's biggest air carrier.

Members of the Air Canada Pilots Association, the 5,400 workers have been working under an expired collective agreement since June 2023. That contract was an inferior 9-year deal negotiated in 2014. It came on the heels of the Conservative government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper using an anti-strike law to illegalize impending strikes by Air Canada pilots, mechanics and other ground crew in 2012, and sanctioning harsh penalties for pilots who participated in an unsanctioned April 2012 "sickout" that the Canada Industrial Relations Board (CIRB) deemed a "wildcat strike."

Air Canada pilots have not carried out an official, union-sanctioned strike since a two-week work stoppage in 1998.

As a result of the extremely lengthy, outdated and unsatisfactory agreement adopted in 2014, pilots at Air Canada currently earn about half the compensation of air crews at the four largest US-based airlines. They also have significantly less favourable pension plans and work scheduling arrangements.

According to Charlene Hudy, chair of the Air Canada ALPA Master Executive Council, the goal is not to strike, but rather to "modernize" the pilots' contract with Canada's principal air carrier. Union officials have been bargaining for "fair compensation, respectable retirement benefits, and quality-of-life

improvements" for more than a year. But Air Canada management continues to call for more "reasonable" pay demands, still citing the bottom-line impacts from the several years of pandemic-induced passenger decline that began the decade.

Workers, however, do not have such short memories that they have forgotten the massive bailouts handed over to the company by the Trudeau Liberal government. Of all publicly traded companies in the country, Air Canada received the single largest amount of federal funding—a staggering C\$492 million of public funds through the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy (CEWS), which covered up to 75 percent of workers' wages. As the WSWs previously explained, the wage subsidy functioned as little more than a slush fund for the corporate elite, with companies continuing to shower their stockholders with fat payouts while claiming the public funds.

Union officials have soft-pedalled the strike vote, expressing their hopes that Air Canada management will meet the pilots' demands and avoid strike action. These same spokespeople remain silent on the very real possibility that the federal Liberal government will intervene to override the collective bargaining rights of the pilots and force them into a pro-employer binding arbitration process, which would once again be used to impose the lion's share of management's demands.

For months, pilots have been hamstrung by the interminable obstacles inherent in the federal collective bargaining process. After the expiration of the previous contract and a subsequent deadlock in negotiations, pilot association officials entered into a lengthy bargaining process with a federally appointed conciliator. With that required process wrapping up on August 26, the workers now must undergo a 21 day "cooling off" period before any legal strike action can

begin.

Of course, pilots at Air Canada are aware of the ongoing moves by both federal and provincial governments across the country to steadily strip workers in key sectors of industry and public service of their right to strike. They have seen threats of and/or actual back-to-work laws used by governments in concert with employers at St. Lawrence Seaway and British Columbia ports, the national railways, Canada Post, and in the airline industry itself.

The right to strike has been under systematic attack in Canada for decades. On dozens of occasions, federal and provincial governments of all political stripes, including the New Democratic Party (NDP), have imposed back-to-work legislation and criminalized worker job actions. But with the deepening crisis of global capitalism driving the ruling class to intensify austerity and worker-exploitation at home, whilst waging war internationally, any disruption to logistics, infrastructure or industry is now forbidden.

Only last month, 680 striking mechanics at WestJet, the country's second largest airline, were forced into an inferior contract after a brief strike was scuttled by federal intervention. With negotiations stalled after the mid-June rejection of a proposed contract by an overwhelming majority of the mechanics, the then federal Liberal Labor Minister, Seamus O'Regan, attempted to prevent a looming strike by ordering WestJet management and the union into binding arbitration.

With reports that both management and the union had agreed to such arbitration, workers nonetheless went ahead with their planned strike, arguing that O'Regan's original order failed to impose any legally sanctioned requirement outlawing strike activity. WestJet management responded by viciously smearing the strikers for holding passengers "hostage" and called on O'Regan to urgently clarify his intentions. The labor minister then hastened to signal that he would instruct the CIRB to issue a ruling illegalizing the mechanics' strike if the union and management failed to bring the dispute to a quick resolution. Shortly thereafter, union officials ended the job action and ensured the ratification of a company friendly contract.

The brewing dispute at Air Canada occurs just days after the Liberal government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau imposed binding arbitration on over 9,300

railway workers employed at Canadian National (CN) and Canadian Pacific Kansas City (CPKC) railways, blocking strike action.

The previous, avowedly right-wing federal Conservative government employed anti-strike legislation as an immediate reflex action to end major strike threats across the economy. The union-supported Liberal government, still propped up by the double-talking NDP, claims to be "pro-worker" but operates from the same playbook.

Riding roughshod over repeated court rulings ostensibly upholding workers' constitutional rights to free collective bargaining, the capitalist ruling elite uses Section 107 of the Canada Labour Code as its "trump card." This section, which the Liberal government has now used three times to short-circuit workers' struggles in the last year, empowers the Labour Minister to order the unelected Canada Industrial Relations Board 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." In other words, quasi-dictatorial powers are activated to guarantee the profits of the corporations over the rights of the working class whenever needed.

Whether it be the looming possibility of a strike at Air Canada or any other contract struggle that workers enter into, hard political lessons must be drawn as governments and corporations move to extinguish the basic democratic rights of the working class whilst the so-called representatives of workers in the union bureaucracies refuse to lift a finger to mount a political struggle to defend the working class against the predations of austerity and war.

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.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact