# Three-day strike at the Port of Montreal poses need for unified struggle by dockers across North America

**Our reporters**
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A three-day strike by dockworkers at the Port of Montreal in Quebec to push demands for wage increases, improvements to gruelling scheduling, and better working conditions commenced Monday. The work stoppage coincides with and must link up with the ongoing strike by 45,000 dockworkers along the US East and Gulf coasts, which has shuttered 36 ports between Maine and Houston, Texas, including five of the continent's 10 largest ports.

The dockers in Montreal are in a political struggle, not just against the ruthless cargo companies represented by the Maritime Employers Agency (MEA), but also against the Trudeau Liberal government and all of corporate Canada. Like their brothers and sisters south of the border, who face a head-on collision with the warmongering Biden administration, dockworkers in Canada are viewed by North America's ruling class as a key cog in the wheel of its continent-wide supply chain network, which it is determined to use to wage imperialist war around the world and boost corporate "competitiveness."

The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), which is the bargaining agent for the 1,150 dockers at the Port of Montreal, is determined above all else to prevent workers from recognizing this basic reality and keep the strike straitjacketed within the pro-employer "collective bargaining" framework. To this end, CUPE has called out just 350 workers at two terminals responsible for about 40 percent of the cargo that passes through the port.

Due to the fact that workers have struck repeatedly over the same issues in recent years, including in 2020 and 2021, and that the current bargaining process has been dragged out over months by the MEA and CUPE, shippers had advanced warning to reroute cargo ahead of the job action. CUPE announced in advance that the strike would be limited to three days.

Earlier this year, the MEA attempted unsuccessfully to have the federal government declare the longshore workers an "essential service," which would have stripped them of the ability to wage any meaningful job action in pursuit of their contract demands.

CUPE filed the required 72-hour strike notice Friday, with workers demanding a 20 percent wage increase spread over a new four-year contract. The longshore workers are also demanding that the MEA end brutal scheduling and speedup practices that destroy any semblance of work-life balance, and threaten the health and safety of workers forced to labour under grueling shift schemes. Furthermore, signs on the picket lines have called for an end to contract labour and an increase in full-time jobs.

Workers voted to reject the last contract offer by the employers by an overwhelming 99.63 percent. Subsequently, the dockers provided the union with a 97.88 percent mandate for "pressure tactics, up to and including strike action" to secure their contract demands. The workers have been without a new deal since December 2023. According to labour regulations, the current strike mandate must be exercised within the next 60 days before becoming void.

A five-day strike in 2021 was criminalized by the trade union-backed Trudeau Liberal government, with workers forced into pro-company binding arbitration. A bitter 12-day strike in August 2020 preceded the government-imposed strike ban.

Following on seamlessly from where the previous vicious anti-worker Conservative government of

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Stephen Harper left off, the Liberal government has worked to use its powers under the federal Canada Labour Code to extinguish the ability of workers to carry out successful strike action.

A militant strike by British Columbia port workers in 2023 was scuttled when the Liberals deployed the Labour Code to force an end to the dispute. Similar tactics ranging from outright back-to-work legislation to threats of imposed binding arbitration have been employed to produce pro-company contracts at major disputes at WestJet, the rail companies CN and CPKC, and the St. Lawrence Seaway. On every occasion, the various union bureaucracies meekly bowed to the government's diktats.

Liberal Minister of Labour Steven MacKinnon has let the union know that he is monitoring events at the Port of Montreal closely, underscoring that government intervention to criminalize job action is all but inevitable should the current strike escape the union's control or an indefinite work stoppage be called at a later date.

That being said, the Liberals would prefer to rely on the services of the CUPE bureaucracy to suppress the dockers' struggle and ram through a sellout agreement that meets the MEA's drive to boost profits for the shipping companies as the Port of Montreal comes under pressure from a global economic slowdown.

CUPE is determined to isolate the striking dockworkers. Even as it issued the strike notice Friday, CUPE offered to call off the job action if the MEA would address two issues: scheduling and the reduced use of senior forepersons during port operations.

Montreal dockworkers should consider the fate of 81 longshore workers at the Port of Quebec City, who are enduring a two-year lockout, while the port relies on scab labour to perform their jobs. CUPE has done everything it could to isolate the longshoremen from the rest of the working class. During the BC dockworkers' strike in July 2023, for example, CUPE did nothing to link the two struggles.

Refusing to mobilize the active support of its hundreds of thousands of members, and of the working class more broadly, CUPE limited itself to futile calls for the adoption of anti-scab legislation by Justin Trudeau's federal Liberal government. Bill C-58, or the anti-scab law, was adopted earlier this year and sought primarily to impose further restrictions on workers' strikes, while including large loopholes allowing the continued use of "replacement workers."

Conditions provide Montreal dockers with an excellent opportunity to break out of the collective bargaining straitjacket imposed on them by CUPE.

To do so, they must link their strike with the strike of US East and Gulf Coast dockworkers, and make this cross-border struggle the spearhead of a mass political movement drawing in all sections of the working class in a political fight against capitalist austerity and war. This is the only basis upon which dockworkers can resist all attempts by the Trudeau and Biden governments to intervene on the side of the employers to enforce another round of concessions, and fight for decent-paying, secure jobs for all.

It will also require a political and organizational break from the union apparatuses, which are bound in a corporatist alliance to the pro-war governments in Ottawa and Washington, as shown by the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) outrageous decision to compel US dockers to continue handling military cargo during the strike.

Additionally, the dockerworkers' struggle in the US and Canada must unite with the 33,000 Boeing machinists currently on strike at one of the largest military contractors in the United States, who rejected a sellout deal by 95 percent.

In order to carry out this fight, Montreal dockworkers should build a rank-and-file strike committee to seize control of their struggle from the CUPE bureaucracy, and take immediate measures to broaden the fight to other sections of workers across Canada and appeal for unity with their brothers and sisters in the United States facing the same attacks of the bosses and governments.

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