

The Role of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers in sabotaging postal workers' struggles: 2011-2024—Part 1

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[Part One] [Part Two]

The 55,000 postal workers represented by the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) completed a strike authorization vote Sunday against Canada Post, more than 7 months after their collective agreements expired. The postal workers are determined to mount an all-out struggle to overturn the years-long assault on their jobs and working conditions, while the for-profit Crown corporation is pleading poverty. It is dead-set on ensuring its profitability by transforming the Canada Post workforce into a precariously employed, low-paid section of the gig economy that competes with the likes of Amazon and UPS.

Canada Post management is notorious for its imperious conduct, including callous indifference to workers' health and safety. But workers confront not merely a ruthless employer, but also Canada Post's corporatist partners in the Liberal government and the trade unions, including the CUPW bureaucracy.

With the full support of the union-backed Liberal government, Canada Post is demanding sweeping concessions from the postal workers, including real wage and benefit cuts, the elimination of full-time shifts and the expanded use of temporary workers on lower pay. They have announced plans to end five day per week mail delivery and to expand parcel delivery to the weekends, imposing ever-more punishing schedules and workloads onto postal workers. Exploiting artificial intelligence, they are seeking to deprive letter carriers of a regular route, switching instead to a constantly changing work assignment based on "maximum efficiency," known as "dynamic routing."

Postal workers are ready to fight against the sweeping demands of their employer, but the CUPW bureaucracy has consistently bent over backwards to placate management—delaying the strike vote months while it engaged in more than 100 meetings with intransigent Canada Post executives. Having led nowhere, the CUPW leadership finally called a strike vote, but purely as a negotiating tactic.

Postal workers are renowned for the militant struggles they waged in the 1960s and 1970s and the gains they won. For this reason, postal workers have been subject to unrelenting attack, with Canada's capitalist ruling elite determined to make an example of them. The attacks on postal workers are a key component of a sweeping drive at all levels of government to privatize public services to benefit the financial oligarchy and subordinate all of society's resources to waging Canada's imperialist wars around the world in alliance with the United States.

Postal workers are in a strong position to resist this onslaught. Their struggle for secure jobs, decent wages, and an end to miserable conditions are issues that affect millions of workers across Canada and internationally. They are also standing up for the right of all workers to strike, a right that has in effect been abrogated by the heavy-handed interventions of successive Tory and Liberal governments. Moreover, the

decimation of public services by governments of all political stripes adversely impacts all workers. The ruling elite uses the money acquired through this relentless social devastation to pay for its wars abroad and boost corporate profits and the incomes of the rich and super-rich. A fight by postal workers to make their struggle the spearhead of a worker-led counter-offensive against this entire class war agenda would win a powerful response from all sections of the working class.

But this is precisely what CUPW and the union bureaucracy as a whole endeavours to prevent. CUPW's record over the past thirteen years of isolating postal workers from the rest of the working class and sabotaging their struggles the moment they developed into a direct political confrontation with the government of the day underscores that to take a single step forward in their struggle, postal workers must break politically and organizationally from the union bureaucracy's suffocating straitjacket. A study of these past defeats so that the necessary lessons can be drawn from them is a precondition for this to take place.

The banning of the 2011 postal workers' strike

In 2011, Stephen Harper's newly elected Conservative majority government was able to inflict a significant defeat on the Canadian working class, when CUPW bowed before a draconian strikebreaking law, and then, in the name of avoiding the imposition of a contract dictated by a Tory-government arbitrator, accepted sweeping concessions in a 4-year contract.

The CUPW bureaucracy, working closely with the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) and the Official Opposition New Democratic Party (NDP), isolated the militant postal workers from their natural allies in other sections of the working class and snuffed out their resistance to the government's draconian back-to-work law.

In the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008, the most influential sections of the Canadian ruling class reached a consensus: the working class needed to pay for the tens of billions pledged by the state to save the financial system from collapse. In order to preserve the profits of Canadian capital and lower the tax burden on big business, corporate Canada and its political stooges determined that they needed to suppress the wages and benefits afforded to workers across the public and private sectors, as well as government spending on critical public services.

Big business rallied behind the hard-right Harper Conservative government, supporting the constitutional coup it carried out to remain in power in the fall of 2008 when the Liberals and NDP moved to oust the minority government with an agreement that would have committed them

to continued austerity at home and the waging of war abroad. The ruling elite felt that at that stage, the Tories were better positioned to carry through the savage attacks they demanded. In the 2011 federal election, due to a massive collapse in support for the Liberals and the anti-democratic nature of the first-past-the-post electoral system, the Conservatives secured a majority government with the votes of *less than one quarter* of the Canadian population.

Faced with this direct assault on their living standards and vital public services, workers across Canada were determined and ready to fight. The 48,000 rank-and-file postal workers were particularly militant, delivering an overwhelming 95 percent mandate to strike in a vote with the highest turnout in CUPW history. In negotiations with the CUPW leadership, Canada Post was provocatively demanding the introduction of a two-tier wage system and benefits to slash compensation, drastic reductions in short-term disability payments for postal workers injured on the job, and the implementation of a hazardous new mail-sorting regimen that would speed-up operations and cut jobs.

Moreover, the postal workers were not alone in their willingness to fight for their livelihoods and working conditions. 3,800 customer-service agents and call centre employees at Air Canada were at the same time locked in a struggle to protect their wages and benefits from the austerity demanded by Canada's largest airline. The contract covering over 12,000 workers at the Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) was set to expire on April 1, 2011, prompting the Liberal provincial government of Dalton McGuinty to declare the TTC an "essential service" and ban them from striking. The Ontario Liberals were at the time demanding a pay freeze for almost 1,000,000 public sector workers in health and education, as a means of implementing the savage cuts demanded by corporate Canada—balancing the budget through austerity like their counterparts in provincial governments across Canada, including NDP governments in Nova Scotia and Manitoba.

In other words, immense potential existed for the militant postal workers to ignite a mass working class counter-offensive to defend public sector workers and public services in the face of the ruling elite's austerity drive.

The CUPW bureaucracy and its President Denis Lemelin, abetted by the CLC and relying upon the NDP in Parliament, did everything it could to isolate the postal workers and prevent their struggle from posing any challenge to ruling-class austerity. Throughout negotiations, the CUPW leadership sought to avoid confrontation with Canada Post management at all costs, holding out for a compromise agreement until the 11th hour. They did nothing to prepare their membership for a national strike that would have brought mail and parcel delivery to a standstill. Instead, they proposed a toothless regime of partial rotating walkouts—boasting of how little the rotating strikes actually affected Canada Post operations. They justified the adoption of such an ineffectual strategy by claiming that it was necessary to avoid a confrontation with the Conservative government and the threat of a back-to-work law.

Above all, the CUPW bureaucracy sought to isolate the postal workers, confining their struggle to the state-sanctioned "collective bargaining process" and not once attempting to link their struggle with the Air Canada workers, public sector workers in the provinces, or other sections of the working class in order to prepare defiance of a strikebreaking law.

Predictably, this refusal by the CUPW to mobilize the full power of the postal workers only emboldened the Harper government, which moved after 12 days to criminalize the rotating strikes and impose a contract on the postal workers with deeper concessions than even the "final offer" from Canada Post management.

The CUPW bureaucracy's allies in the CLC and the NDP did not even issue a press release supporting the postal workers until the Harper government introduced strikebreaking legislation. Their response was to half-heartedly organize with the CUPW a series of rallies protesting the bill, not to mobilize postal workers to defy the law but to defuse their

anger. The NDP carried out an ineffectual Parliamentary filibuster for 58 hours, acknowledging that the back-to-work law was an attack on the rights of all workers. Nevertheless, when the CUPW executive board voted unanimously to order postal workers to abandon all job action and return to work, the NDP ended their Parliamentary maneuvers and allowed the back-to-work law to pass. The union bureaucrats, powerless before the state, vowed to challenge the strikebreaking legislation in court, a process that takes many years.

The *World Socialist Website* covered the 2011 struggle closely, and members of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) intervened to warn postal workers about the impending betrayal of their struggle. In a statement on the passage of the strikebreaking law, we wrote:

Workers must draw the lessons of the unions' and NDP's role in aiding and abetting the Harper government in inflicting a major defeat on the postal workers and accelerating, thereby, big business' drive to make working people pay for the global capitalist crisis.

To defend its social position and fundamental rights, the working class must advance its own program to resolve the economic crisis at the expense of big business, through the bringing to power of a workers' government committed to placing the banks and basic industry under public ownership and the democratic control of the working class.

All of the struggles of working people against plant closures, public service cuts, concessions and anti-worker laws must be united into an independent working class political movement against the Harper government and the entire capitalist order.

Such a struggle requires a political and organizational break with the unions and the NDP, which exist to suppress and smother the working class. In opposition to the labor bureaucrats, workers must build new independent organizations of struggle, workplace and neighbourhood committees, and most importantly a mass socialist party of the working class, so as to prosecute the struggle for a workers' government.

The Election of Mike Palecek and the dead end of "militant" trade unionism

The CUPW bureaucracy's betrayal of the 2011 postal workers' strike and their subservience before Canada Post and the Harper government provoked a rising wave of anger among postal workers, threatening the ability of the union leadership to control the rank and file.

In 2013, Canada Post released a five-year business plan containing proposals for between 6,000 and 8,000 job cuts, the abandonment of home delivery, sharp increases to mailing costs, and the privatization of post offices. At the urging of the Harper government, it began to phase out door-to-door mail delivery for 5 million addresses in urban areas in order to facilitate these cuts.

In response, the CUPW launched an abject and powerless campaign to "save Canada Post." This initiative, rejecting the defence of the postal service as a public service, fully accepted the principle that state-owned Canada Post should be run as a profit-making concern and merely suggested a series of alternative measures of doing so. The centrepiece of CUPW's campaign was for Canada Post to enter the financial services sector by creating a postal bank, a plan that the WSWS described at the time as a "reactionary pipe dream."

The failure of the CUPW to wage any effective struggle against Canada

Post's government-backed assault on their jobs, and ineffectual charade of the "Save Canada Post" campaign, deepened the already widespread anger among postal workers towards the union bureaucracy. This found distorted expression in May 2015, when postal workers elected self-described "militant" shop steward Mike Palecek as President of the CUPW. Palecek, who before his election was a member of the pseudo-left Fightback group, was promoted through the union bureaucracy as a "left" figure who could appeal to rank-and-file anger, while keeping them from breaking with the right-wing union leadership. Palecek claimed he would revive the militant traditions of the CUPW of the 1960s and 1970s, when it repeatedly defied anti-strike laws.

In an interview on the eve of his election as CUPW president, Palecek sought to temper his rhetoric on the CUPW potentially defying back-to-work legislation. Laying the blame on the workers themselves, Palecek cautioned that it is "a high-stakes game, and there is no easy answer that is applicable to every situation." He then declared, "The rest of the labour movement must be ready to stand up to the government, and rank and file workers have to be ready to go the distance. ... I have a good idea of what it takes to force a government to back down, and have promised our members I am willing to lead them as far as they are willing to go."

Once Palecek was elected, he immediately continued the right-wing policies of the CUPW bureaucracy. His first order of business was to lead the union's intervention in the 2015 federal election—pledging the union's support to the Liberal Party and their candidate Justin Trudeau. Palecek played a key role in the "Anybody But Conservative" (ABC) campaign, in which the trade union bureaucracy as a whole sought to channel working class opposition to the hated Harper government into a get-out-the-vote campaign for the Liberals, the Canadian bourgeoisie's preferred party of government.

In particular, Palecek cynically promoted the Trudeau campaign's pledge to suspend the Harper government's phase-out of home mail delivery, pending a promised review of the postal service by a specially appointed task force.

A week after Justin Trudeau was sworn in as Prime Minister, Palecek was among the dozens of top union bureaucrats who attended a closed-door meeting with the Prime Minister to pledge their readiness to work in collaboration with the new government. The alliance between the trade union bureaucracy and the Trudeau government had crucial support from pseudo-left groups like Fightback, who maintained a conspicuous silence on their former member's promotion of and collaboration with the pro-war, pro-austerity Liberals.

The CUPW bureaucracy's embrace of the Liberals in 2015 coincided with Canada Post management demanding even further cuts and restructuring to ensure the profitability of the postal service. In the contract dispute that ensued on the expiry of the deal imposed by the 2011 back-to-work law, Canada Post demanded the elimination of a defined benefit pension plan for new hires, a four-year pay freeze for temporary workers, major cuts to medical and other benefits, and the slashing of more than 1,000 postal clerk positions.

Palecek initially struck a militant tone, calling strike votes in May and June 2016, and receiving another overwhelming mandate from postal workers—94 percent voted to strike. Palecek and the CUPW bureaucracy, however, deepened even further the right-wing strategy they pursued in 2011. They refused to call a strike and avoided any job action that could affect the operations of Canada Post, claiming that it would "disrupt" the Liberal government's much promised task force to review the postal service.

Palecek fraudulently presented this committee, which included Liberal-connected businesswomen Françoise Bertrand and Krystyna Hoeg, as an "historic opportunity" through which workers could help determine the future of the postal service. In fact, the review was based on the premise that Canada Post be run as a profit-making enterprise, and that to achieve

those ends, "nothing was off the table." While Palecek and the CUPW used the review to smother postal workers' opposition and promote the bureaucracy's postal banking scheme, the Liberals and Canada Post management used it to lay the ground for a massive attack on postal workers.

Just days before the task force delivered the first phase of its review, Palecek and the CUPW leadership cravenly capitulated, accepting a 2-year contract that left in place all of the concessions imposed in 2011 and included further rollbacks, instituting a real wage cut for letter carriers and expanding the use of temporary employees. When the review task force produced its report, its conclusions were entirely in line with Canada Post's demands for major structural changes to the postal service. It urged the Crown corporation to drastically reduce costs, resume the phasing out of home delivery started by Harper, and launch a frontal assault on postal workers' pensions. It flatly rejected the union's call for a postal banking scheme. Canada Post management hailed the committee's report for endorsing "the path the corporation was taking to secure its future for Canadians."

As in 2011, the WSWs intervened aggressively into the postal workers' struggle in 2016. We wrote at the time:

While CUPW claimed it was disappointed with the task force's document, it bears full responsibility for such an outcome. Its entire perspective was based on support for the big business Liberal government, which Palecek presented as a friend of working people, and its postal review...

What the labour conflict at Canada Post has demonstrated is that to defend their jobs and postal services, workers need an entirely new political strategy. Postal workers should first of all reject the rotten collective agreement just signed by their union leadership, which seeks to demobilize workers as management and the Liberal government prepare the ground for further attacks.

Postal workers need to take the struggle out of the hands of the pro-capitalist CUPW and build independent rank-and-file committees that should fight for a working-class counter-offensive, drawing in workers in both the public and private sectors, in defence of public services and workers' social rights. Such a struggle will bring the working class into headlong conflict with the entire big business elite, their political parties and state, and pose the need for a workers' party, based on a socialist-internationalist program, to fight for workers' power and the reorganization of socio-economic life on the basis of social equality.

To get involved with the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee, fill out the form below.



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