

“Rank-and-file postal workers, not the corrupt union officialdom, should decide if MacKinnon’s antidemocratic back-to-work order will be respected or defied”

Canada Post workers call for working class to mobilize in opposition to Liberal government’s strike ban

Our reporters
15 December 2024

Opposition to the Justin Trudeau-led Liberal government’s imminent criminalization of the more than four week-long strike at Canada Post is strong among rank-and-file postal workers across the country.

With the Canada Industrial Relations Board (CIRB) expected to place its rubber stamp, Monday or Tuesday, on the government’s de facto order that the 55,000 postal workers be forced back-to-work, calls are growing for a mass mobilization of the working class to defend postal workers and the right to strike.

Last Friday, Labour Minister Steven MacKinnon announced that he was ordering the CIRB to force striking postal workers back on the job under long expired collective agreements, if it determines negotiations between Canada Post and the Canadian Union of Postal Workers are at an “impasse”—a foregone conclusion.

This marks the third time in four months that the trade union-backed Liberal government has relied on the unelected CIRB and a phony “reinterpretation” of Section 107 of the Canada Labour Code to end a strike by fiat, without any reference to parliament.

Per MacKinnon’s order, if the CIRB determines an “impasse,” it must order the postal workers back on the job and strip them of the legal right to strike until mid-May. On Friday, MacKinnon also ordered the creation of an Industrial Inquiries Commission and tasked it with reviewing all of Canada Post’s operations. This is a transparent ploy to bolster Canada Post’s hand, by providing “neutral,” “third-party” support for the Crown corporation’s plans to massively restructure the postal service at the expense of postal workers, including by slashing thousands of permanent full-time jobs.

The Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) has not lifted a finger to mobilize opposition to the looming criminalization of the strike or even called mass membership meetings so workers can discuss next steps and formulate a strategy to defy and defeat the government strike ban.

Instead, it has issued pro forma statements denouncing the attack on workers’ right-to-strike and ordered the strikers to stand by for further instructions.

This is in keeping with the CUPW bureaucracy’s sabotage of the strike from its outset. Throughout the now more than four-week battle, it has done everything it can to isolate the postal workers, and though it has been evident from the outset that Canada Post was relying on government intervention to break the strike, it has failed to advance any strategy to

counter such a state attack. Clearly, as it has done numerous times in the past, CUPW is preparing to bow to the government strikebreaking and announce once the CIRB issues its order that workers have no choice but to return to work.

As for the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), even though the defence of the right to strike is of critical importance to all workers, it has not so much as issued a press release, let alone proposed any concrete action, to oppose the Liberal government’s strikebreaking.

The union bureaucracies’ refusal to sanction any action that would bring postal workers and broader sections of the working class into direct confrontation with the Liberal government comes as no surprise. The union bureaucracy and the union-sponsored New Democratic Party (NDP) have been key main pillars of support for the Trudeau government over the past nine years, as it has taken the axe to public spending and repeatedly criminalized strikes. The imposition of austerity and resort to ever more draconian forms of rule have gone hand in hand with the government’s pursuit of military rearmament and aggressive imperialist wars around the world. At the unions’ urging, the NDP has propped up Trudeau’s minority government in parliament since 2019 and continues to do so to this day.

A striking postal worker from Ontario, who is also a leading member of the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee (PWRFC), wrote to the *World Socialist Web Site*:

Rank-and-file postal workers, not the corrupt union officialdom, should decide if Labour Minister Steven MacKinnon’s antidemocratic back-to-work order will be respected or defied. The CUPW may attempt to deceive us with hopeless appeals to the rigged collective bargaining framework or other parts of the capitalist establishment, like the courts. Even when strikebreaking laws are found to be unconstitutional, as with those that were used to criminalize our rotating walkouts in 2011 and 2018, concessions-filled contracts remain in place, and no remedies are offered to workers whose wages and working conditions were negatively impacted.

The power of postal workers is not limited to politely asking for a better contract. No. Fundamentally, our potential political power

stems from our relationship to the productive forces of society, and together with other sections of workers, we are an unstoppable force, able to countermand the Labour Minister's orders.

Another worker wrote to the PWRFC to express her support for "a revolutionary socialist strategy to combat the capitalist state and its mowing down of workers' most basic right to strike." She also appealed for "a broad fight linking up their struggle with the assault on the working class across the country and internationally." Referring to the PWRFC's call for workers to demand that CUPW call shop floor meetings in every local and at every facility within 36 hours to discuss how to defy a strike ban, she demanded to know why the Committee was placing demands on the union bureaucracy, which has a long record of selling out the workers.

A representative of the PWRFC responded in an email,

First, the intent is NOT to foster illusions in the postal workers about CUPW. The demand was raised based on an objective appraisal of the balance of forces between our committee and the bureaucracy. Workers face an immediate crisis in the next 36 hours—we will be legislated back to work. Our committee is small, and we have no independent organizational mechanism of our own to advance these demands. We don't have a network of shop floor committees across the country, yet. Further, we're not calling for individual workers, or isolated small groups of the most militant workers to defy the back to work order on their own. That would only expose them, doing CUPW and the Corporation a big favour. Such workers could be identified, isolated, administratively punished, and driven out.

The order can ONLY be defied collectively, by the vast majority of postal workers. That is where the power of our class resides—in collective action as a class, located at the point of production. The only possible means to discuss that option realistically, over the next 36 hours, would be shop floor meetings, which are currently controlled by the bureaucracy. Our demand takes that reality into account.

We don't expect that CUPW will hold such meetings. But having made the demand, the workers can then quite rightly ask CUPW why they refuse to hold such meetings. Why are they not permitting these decisions to be taken democratically? Why do the workers have no say in their deliberations? Working through these questions is part of the process of raising the class consciousness of other workers who haven't perhaps quite caught up to you or to the members of our committee, which we would ask you to join.

This struggle is not over just because the government and the CUPW bureaucracy are working together to send us back to work. The struggle must continue, and we must continue to build rank-and-file organizations, independent of the CUPW bureaucracy.

The attack on the right of Canada Post workers to strike has international significance. It is part of a turn by the ruling elites in every major country to authoritarian forms of rule as they seek to suppress social opposition to their class war agenda of austerity for workers at home and imperialist war abroad. At the PWRFC's recent public meeting on December 8, postal workers from the United States and Britain spoke in support of the strike, stressing the commonality of the fights they are engaged in for job security and to oppose the privatization of public services.

The striking postal worker from Ontario commented,

Postal workers across Canada have been on strike for one month, because our jobs and working conditions are under attack. "Dynamic routing" restructures make use of automation and artificial intelligence technologies to adjust routes on a day-to-day basis, effectively eliminating the concept of "route ownership." Fewer and more overworked employees will be expected to complete more work for less pay. Once this technology is proven effective anywhere in the world, it will rapidly spread across borders, enriching a tiny layer of parasitic capitalists at the expense of the working class. For our strike to be successful at taking control of these technologies for the benefit of workers, it must recognize the international nature of these technologies, and our struggle must be expanded to unite all workers at logistics companies across Canada and beyond.

The union leadership does not believe in the revolutionary strength of an independently mobilized working class. The CUPW believes in the complete subordination of workers to the profit motive, and would therefore never call for a general political strike. In contrast, the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee analyzed the ongoing strike in a statement issued on Friday in response to MacKinnon's announcement, concluding that the "conditions for us to defy the state assault on our right to strike and mobilize broad support within the working class, up to and including in a general strike, are propitious." We understand that mobilizing broad sections of workers in struggle is the only way to defend our basic democratic rights, including the right to strike. The introduction of automation and artificial intelligence will benefit workers only if these technological breakthroughs are expropriated from the billionaire class and brought under the control of workers themselves.

A Socialist Equality Party statement on the postal workers' strike, issued December 5, laid out the central political issues facing postal workers if they are to develop their struggle as part of an international industrial and political mobilization of workers throughout the logistics and other sectors:

To break out of the stranglehold of the trade union/New Democratic Party/Liberal alliance—the prerequisite for mobilizing the industrial and political power of the working class—workers must take the struggle into their own hands by building rank-and-file committees. Successful defiance of an impending intervention by the government to break the postal workers' strike and impose Canada Post's demands will only be possible if broader sections of workers are mobilized in an industrial and political movement to bring down the Trudeau government and fight for the transfer of political power to the working class.



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