

Air Canada demands government intervention against 10,000 flight attendants set to strike Saturday

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Some 10,000 Air Canada flight attendants are set to strike early Saturday morning, in what would be the first national walkout by the airline's cabin crew in fourteen years. A strike would disrupt operations at Canada's largest airline which accounts for more than half of the industry's passenger capacity, operating nearly 1,000 flights every day.

The immediate trigger is the breakdown of contract negotiations, following the expiry in March of a decade-long agreement signed in 2015. That deal, pushed through by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), locked workers into stagnating wages for ten years, while inflation steadily eroded their real incomes.

Average annual pay for an Air Canada flight attendant now stands at around \$53,000, with new hires earning less and potentially even substantially less than \$40,000 per year, depending on their flight hours and route types. Over the past quarter-century, wages for new entrants have risen a mere 10 percent. Entry-level crew are paid poverty wages for work that demands constant travel, irregular schedules, and direct responsibility for passenger safety.

Making matters worse, flight attendants are not paid for critical duties before boarding and after deplaning, including safety checks and passenger assistance—wages in fact do not start being paid until the plane pushes back from the airport boarding gate.

There is immense anger among the flight attendants over the erosion of their real wages, under conditions where the airline has made bumper profits, apart from the worst years of the COVID-19 pandemic. 99.7% of flight attendants voted for strike action, with 94.6% of workers participating.

Air Canada offered what it claims is as a “generous” 38 percent compensation increase over four years, including

a 25 percent bump in the first year, along with 50 percent pay for duties before takeoff and purported improvements to pensions and rest provisions. The real wage increase of this offer would, in reality, be closer to 17.2 percent and would leave the core issue of unpaid work unresolved.

The airline has responded with lockout threats and has begun canceling flights in phases ahead of a full shutdown, threatening to strand as many as 130,000 passengers a day.

On August 11, Air Canada demanded that the federal government intervene to impose binding arbitration to resolve all outstanding issues. CUPE rejected the plan. The next day, the company formally requested that the federal Liberal government invoke Section 107 of the Canada Labour Code to impose binding interest arbitration before any strike or lockout can take effect. In a public statement, Air Canada openly pointed to “proven precedent” in recent government interventions to halt or short-circuit strikes by Canada Post, rail, port, and airline workers—making clear it expects Ottawa to once again serve as a strikebreaker.

This is not a hypothetical threat. Successive governments, Liberal and Conservative alike, have repeatedly used the anti-worker provisions of the Canada Labour Code, and cooked up new interpretations, to criminalize strikes and impose concessions without having to go to parliament for back-to-work legislation.

Just last December, the Liberals banned a strike by Canada Post workers and forced them to vote earlier this month on a concessionary contract dictated by management. Similar measures have been used to block strikes in the rail and port sectors in recent years. The aim in every case is the same: to keep workers down and the profits extracted from their labour flowing into the bank accounts of the ruling class by enforcing “labor peace” on

terms dictated by corporate Canada.

The flight attendants have been down this road before. In 2011, CUPE issued a strike notice only to rescind it hours before the walkout was to begin, after the Conservative government threatened back-to-work legislation and the unelected Canadian Industrial Relations Board suspended their right to strike. CUPE meekly complied, sending the dispute into arbitration. That capitulation disoriented workers, demobilized their struggle, and paved the way for the ten-year sellout agreement whose expiration has triggered the current conflict. The lesson is clear: appeals to the state or reliance on its “neutral” arbitration machinery lead inevitably to defeat.

The Liberal government of Prime Minister Mark Carney is already positioning itself to intervene in defence of Air Canada’s profits. While Jobs Minister Patty Hajdu has so far limited herself to calling on “both sides” to reach a negotiated settlement, the big business Liberals’ record leaves no doubt that the government will act to prevent a strike that would disrupt the operations of one of Canada’s largest corporations. The invocation of Section 107 hangs over the dispute as a weapon to strip workers of their most fundamental democratic rights.

While posturing against the prospect of government dictated binding arbitration, CUPE has confined its strategy to appeals for “good faith” bargaining and a letter-writing campaign to members of Parliament—the very people who impose the dictates of the ruling class, including multi-billion spending increases for the military to wage war around the world, and massive handouts to the financial oligarchy and corporate Canada. This is not a strategy to win, but a deliberate effort to keep the struggle within the straitjacket of a labor relations system designed by the corporations and enforced by the state.

CUPE’s determination to smother the social power of the Air Canada flight attendants flows from its close corporatist ties to the state and corporate executives. As the country’s largest union by membership, CUPE is a key pillar of the trade union bureaucracy’s decades-long support for the Liberals, including the pro-war, pro-austerity Liberal governments led by Trudeau and Carney over the past decade.

The intolerable conditions facing Air Canada flight attendants are part of a broader deterioration in working conditions facing the entire working class. Across the country and internationally, governments and corporations are using inflation, corporate restructuring, and state-backed legal measures to drive down real wages,

intensify workloads, and erode job security. Postal workers, rail workers, port workers, public service employees, and educators across Canada have all faced the same combination of intransigent employers, state intervention, and a union bureaucracy totally committed to defending Canadian capitalism by imposing the crisis on the backs of the workers they claim to represent.

The outcome of the flight attendants’ struggle will have far-reaching consequences. If Air Canada succeeds in using the government to impose arbitration, it will embolden other employers to do the same, further entrenching the precedent that the right to strike exists only at the pleasure of the state. This would be a major step toward the de facto outlawing of strikes in key sectors of the economy.

To prevent such a defeat, flight attendants must take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands. This means forming rank-and-file committees in every workplace, independent of the CUPE bureaucracy, to unify cabin crew across bases and connect their fight with workers in other industries facing similar attacks across Canada, in the United States and internationally. Such committees will organize mass meetings, appeal directly for support from rail, postal, port, and public sector workers, and prepare joint actions to defy anti-strike laws and government strikebreaking.

The fight at Air Canada is not about one contract or one company. It is about defending the most basic rights of the working class against a ruling elite determined to gut them. The choice facing workers is stark: submit to arbitration and accept another round of wage erosion and unpaid labor, or mobilize their collective strength to win a genuine victory. The first step is to break from the framework that has led to defeat after defeat, and to organize a movement that places the needs of working people above profits.



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