

Air Canada flight attendants defy Liberal government strikebreaking order

Our reporters
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Workers across Canada and all North America must come to the defence of the more than 10,000 Air Canada flight attendants, who are courageously defying a federal government strikebreaking order.

Their defiance forced Canada's largest airline to scrap the plans it had announced triumphantly Sunday morning for the resumption of flights later that afternoon.

The Air Canada flight attendants walked out on strike shortly after midnight Friday. Less than 12 hours later, Liberal government Jobs Minister Patty Hajdu instructed the Canada Industrial Relations Board (CIRB) to order an immediate end to the strike.

This unelected arm of the state—long-promoted by the unions as a “neutral” third-party umpire, currently chaired by former Air Canada lawyer Maryse Tremblay, and staffed with numerous former union functionaries—hastened to do the government's bidding. By late Saturday evening, the CIRB had issued a legally enforceable antistrike ruling.

Under the government's diktat, as of 2:00 p.m. Eastern Time Sunday, any and all job actions by the Air Canada flight attendants are illegal. Per its command, their new contract will be determined through binding arbitration, with workers not even having the right to vote on the conditions of their employment. In the interim, the flight attendants are to work under the terms of a concessionary contract signed 10 years ago, under which they perform on average 35 hours of unpaid labour per month.

In defying the Liberal government's dictatorial antistrike order, the flight attendants are showing the way forward for the entire working class.

They are challenging a massive state assault on workers' right to strike, and big business's drive to intensify worker exploitation, including by using inflation to impose real wage cuts and boost profits.

The flight attendants must not be left to fight alone against Air Canada, corporate Canada, which joined the airline in baying for quick state action to break the strike, the Mark Carney-led Liberal government and the repressive apparatus of the capitalist state.

The state assault on the right to strike

Canada's capitalist elite, no less than its counterparts in the US and Europe, is determined to wage the fight for markets, profits and resources in a commercial and military-territorial repartition of the world at the expense of working people, and to employ authoritarian means to impose its will.

Spearheaded by the Trudeau-Carney Liberal government, the ruling class is seeking to effectively abolish the right to strike, which is workers' fundamental right to collectively assert their class interests.

Based on a patently illegal, cooked-up “reinterpretation” of Section 107 of the Canada Labour Code, the Liberal government, first under Justin

Trudeau and now Prime Minister Mark Carney, has arrogated to itself the power to illegalize any job action by workers in federally-regulated industries and impose binding arbitration.

Since last August, it has ordered the CIRB, under Section 107, to illegalize strikes by Canadian National and Canadian Pacific Kansas City rail workers, Quebec and British Columbia port workers, 55,000 Canada Post workers and now the Air Canada flight attendants.

Governments were previously compelled to seek parliament's approval in stripping workers of the right to strike. But over the past year the Trudeau-Carney Liberal government has established a procedure under Section 107 whereby the Jobs/Labor Minister can unilaterally direct the CIRB “to do such things as the Minister deems necessary” “to maintain or secure industrial peace.”

Taking inspiration from the federal Liberal government's strikebreaking and the refusal of the unions to lift a finger to mobilize the working class against it, Quebec's provincial government in late May adopted its own sweeping antistrike law (Bill 89). It gives the Quebec labour minister similar dictatorial powers and dramatically broadens the categories and number of workers who are designated as “essential employees” and thus legally prohibited from striking.

The strike must be broadened and waged as a working-class political struggle

CUPE, like the rest of Canada's unions, has been a staunch supporter of the decade-old Liberal government, claiming it is a “progressive” alternative to the Conservatives. Through the union-sponsored NDP, it has propped up the minority Liberal government, under Trudeau and now Carney, as it enforced “post-pandemic” austerity, waged war on Russia, massively increased military spending and eviscerated the right to strike.

If the right-wing bureaucrats who head Canada's largest union have been forced to sanction—at least for the moment—workers' defiance of the government antistrike order, it is due to the massive anger within and pressure from the rank and file.

The flight attendants, who voted 99.5 percent in favor of strike action in a ballot in which more than 94 percent of the membership participated, are furious that the government intervened to illegalize their struggle just hours after it began. Their readiness to challenge the government and its anti-democratic law speaks to a growth in class consciousness and political radicalization.

The government, used to the support and kowtowing of the labour bureaucracy, has no doubt been taken aback by the flight attendants' action.

That said, no one should be under the slightest illusion.

Unless the strike is immediately broadened to other workers and is

transformed into a political class struggle—that is, an industrial and political working class offensive against the Carney government and the entire ruling class agenda of austerity and war—it will be isolated and smothered through a combination of state repression and sabotage from within by the bureaucratic, pro-capitalist union apparatuses.

An urgent appeal must be made for support from all sections of the working class, for solidarity walkouts, and immediate preparations for a general strike, beginning with the powerful battalions of the industrial working class who have been directly targeted by the Liberal government strikebreaking over the past year—the rail workers, port workers and Canada Post workers.

Similar appeals must be directed to workers throughout North America's aviation industry, who are similarly subjected to the never-ending drive of the industry bosses and the Wall and Bay Street investors to cut labour costs and skimp on safety requirements. The refusal of the airlines to pay flight attendants for the dozens of hours each month spent boarding, deplaning, doing safety checks, and enduring flight delays is of burning importance to flight attendants in the US, no less than Canada.

Workers must take the struggle into their own hands

The greatest immediate threat to the Air Canada flight attendants' struggle and the development of a working class counter-offensive is the CUPE union apparatus and the union bureaucracy as a whole.

Workers must wrench control of the struggle from the hands of the bureaucracy to prevent them from betraying it.

The CUPE leadership has for the moment called for defiance of the government's strikebreaking order. But this is merely a maneuver to retain control over a rank and file seething with anger, and in the hopes of retaining a state-regulated collective bargaining system in which it serves as a partner of Air Canada, other private sector employers and the state.

Virtually from the outset of negotiations, it was evident that the threat of state intervention against the flight attendants was central to Air Canada's bargaining strategy, and that it would find a willing instrument in the big business Liberal government.

Yet the CUPE apparatus did nothing to prepare the rank and file for the looming confrontation with the government, and for mass defiance of an anti-democratic back-to-work order by mobilizing support from workers across the North American aviation industry and the broader working class.

Not even on Saturday after Hajdu announced she was outlawing the strike did the union advance any call for defiance of a back-to-work order or call mass membership meetings to discuss how the government's strikebreaking could be defeated.

Instead, it waited till late Sunday morning, after it had held strike-support rallies in Montreal, Toronto, Calgary and Vancouver, to announce that workers should ignore the strike ban, thereby setting the precedent that workers will be excluded from all decision-making about the course of the struggle.

Even more significantly, in calling for defiance it issued no meaningful call for workers across Canada, public and private sector alike, to come to the flight attendants' defence and defeat the state assault on the right to strike.

Rather it coupled its call for workers to remain on the picket lines, with an appeal to Air Canada to immediately return to the bargaining table "to negotiate a fair deal."

Every flight attendant knows full well that the company has no interest in a "fair deal." Rather it is intent on continuing to enforce grueling schedules, unpaid work, and below-inflation pay "increases" on its

workforce. Moreover, how can one honestly talk of any kind of "fair" bargaining when the Liberal government has already made clear that it will pull out all the stops to enforce management's demands?

The CUPE bureaucracy, to say nothing of the heads of the other major union bodies, are utterly opposed to mobilizing the working class against the big business Liberal government. When the former central banker and Prime Minister Mark Carney was elected in late April, the top union bureaucrats cheered that this was the best possible outcome for workers because it prevented the far-right demagogue Pierre Poilievre from coming to power.

Even now, CUPE leaders have attacked Carney for "caving in" and "capitulating" to the demands of Air Canada management by seeking to impose binding arbitration. As if it's a matter of the bosses having to twist the prime minister's arm—a man who has served the financial oligarchy his entire adult life and under the cover of opposing Trump's bullying is overseeing a radical shift to the right!

The deliberate purpose of CUPE's attempt to mask the reality that Carney and his government are the direct tools of corporate Canada and the financial elite is to prevent flight attendants from drawing the necessary conclusion that they face a political fight against the entire ruling class to secure their demands.

In this effort, CUPE enjoys the backing of the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), which has done nothing to mobilize the millions of workers it claims to represent in support of the Air Canada strikers. The CLC and Unifor, the country's largest private sector union, are key pillars of the union/Liberal/New Democratic Party alliance, which has served to smother working class opposition to austerity and war for over three decades.

A vital lesson for Air Canada workers in this regard is provided by the fate of the 2022 Ontario education support workers' strike. After CUPE was forced to sanction a walkout in defiance of the right-wing Ford government's preemptive banning of their strike, a movement for a general strike in solidarity with the low-paid strikers rapidly developed among broad sections of workers.

At that point CUPE, with support from the national CLC and Unifor leaders, intervened to quickly shut the strike down, reaching a behind-the-scenes agreement with Ford to withdraw his strike ban in exchange for the strike being called off without any of the workers' demands being met. After the unions successfully demobilized the strike, effectively saving the Ford government from defeat at the hands of the working class, the CUPE bureaucrats rammed through a concessions-filled contract at the "bargaining table."

To prevent a similar defeat, Air Canada workers must seize control of their strike from the CUPE bureaucracy's hands by building rank-and-file strike committees at every location. These committees should be based on the recognition that what is involved is an all-out political struggle—one requiring the mobilization of the broadest sections of the working class across all economic spheres to win. The committees must explain to airline workers across North America why the issues at the heart of the Air Canada strike are of direct relevance to their own working conditions. Additionally, they must appeal to all workers on the basis that the defence of the right to strike and of decent-paying jobs with good working conditions are issues of concern to every worker.

Conditions for these appeals to meet with a powerful response across Canada and the United States are extremely favourable. In the US, the unions have presided over a dramatic deterioration in wages and working conditions over the past four decades, to the point where workers—like the Stellantis autoworker Ronald Adams—are dying on a daily basis due to workplace injuries in America's industrial slaughterhouse. Summing up the role of the US union bureaucracy in sabotaging worker opposition to the ruling elite's class war onslaught, former US President Joe Biden labeled the unions his "domestic NATO."

The logic of the struggle launched by Air Canada workers in defiance of the federal government and corporate Canada is its expansion into an industrial and political counteroffensive by workers across North America to put an end to brutal worker exploitation and the subordination of working conditions to capitalist profit. Workers must combine their undoubted courage and militancy with the socialist and internationalist program necessary to wage this fight.



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