

Air Canada workers defy back-to-work order: A turning point in the global class struggle

Keith Jones**18 August 2025**

In a courageous action challenging the Canadian ruling class' drive to effectively abolish the right to strike, 10,500 Air Canada flight attendants are defying a federal Liberal government back-to-work order.

Their defiance of the government and bourgeois "law and order" heralds an intensification of class struggle globally. The scramble of the imperialist powers, led by the US, to repartition the world economically and territorially through trade war and military conflict is being waged on the backs of the working class, impelling it into mass struggle.

Less than four months after the Liberals were returned to power under their newly-minted leader, the ex-central banker Mark Carney, a militant working-class movement is challenging the government's fiat, and throwing it into political crisis.

The flight attendants walked off the job shortly after midnight Friday to oppose Air Canada's refusal to pay them for work done before departure and after landing—amounting to an average of 35 hours of unpaid labour per month—and to fight against years of falling real wages imposed under the ten-year contract their union, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), forced through in 2015.

Less than 12 hours after the strike began, Jobs Minister Patty Hajdu invoked Section 107—an obscure Canada Labour Code provision the government recently "reinterpreted" to arrogate to it the power to unilaterally illegalize strikes, bypassing parliament. As per the government's cooked-up reinterpretation, Hajdu ordered the unelected Canadian Industrial Relations Board (CIRB) to declare the strike illegal and impose binding arbitration.

First under Justin Trudeau and now Carney, the Liberal government has repeatedly used Section 107 over the past twelve months to illegalize worker job actions. Those previously targeted include rail workers, port workers and 55,000 Canada Post workers. On all previous occasions, the bureaucratic union apparatuses, CUPE included, have connived with the government to enforce the strike bans.

If this time around the CUPE bureaucrats felt compelled to sanction defiance of the government back-to-work order, it was due to their fear of losing all credibility with, and political control over, a militant, outraged rank and file. The Air Canada flight attendants had voted 99 percent for strike action on a turnout of over 94 percent.

The CIRB has now officially declared the workers' defiance of its Section 107 strikebreaking order an "illegal strike." This clears the way for the government and/or Air Canada to obtain court injunctions against the strike, thereby making individual workers, union officials and CUPE liable to steep fines. Union leaders could face imprisonment.

The confrontation between the government and the Air Canada flight attendants expresses the irreconcilable conflict between the ruling capitalist elite and the working class that is reaching a boiling point in Canada and globally.

The flight attendants' defiance has shattered the myth of "national unity" promoted by the Canadian ruling class, its political representatives and the trade union bureaucracy in response to US President Donald Trump's trade war and threats to annex Canada.

Throughout 2025, official political life has been dominated by a foul nationalist, flag-waving campaign, in which the union apparatus, the social-democratic New Democratic Party and the pseudo-left have all rallied behind the ruling class' "Team Canada," urging "all Canadians" to unite to "save" the country.

Senior labour bureaucrats have joined the Prime Minister's Council on Canada-US Relations, tasked with developing the Canadian ruling class' strategy in response to Trump's repudiation of the traditional US-Canada partnership. At the same time, the entire union apparatus has been mobilized to champion retaliatory tariffs targeting American, Chinese and other workers.

As the assault on the Air Canada strike demonstrates, behind the din of nationalist tub-thumping the Canadian ruling class is adopting Trump-style policies. This includes

authoritarian methods of rule to bolster the economic “competitiveness” and military-strategic position of Canadian imperialism and thereby ensure, in the words of Carney, that it is a predator, not prey, in the imperialist redivision of the world.

The Carney government has pledged hundreds of billions of dollars in increased military spending over the next decade, launched a sweeping austerity drive, introduced legislation gutting refugee rights, and courted Trump—flattering the would-be dictator and offering him political support—in the hopes of securing a renewed economic and military-security alliance with Washington and Wall Street.

In challenging the ruling class’ assault on the right to strike, the Air Canada flight attendants have struck a blow for the entire working class.

But if this militant struggle is to become the catalyst for a true working class counter-offensive, its implicit repudiation of “Team Canada” and the subordination of the working class to the strategic imperatives of Canadian imperialism must be made explicit: through the development of an independent political movement of the working class, based on a socialist-internationalist strategy.

The rival ruling classes are whipping up nationalism and anti-immigrant chauvinism to divide workers at home and dragoon them behind their trade wars and military conflicts. But workers are united as never before by the process of global production, under the aegis of transnational corporations whose operations span the planet. Workers, moreover, are the principal victims of the predatory struggles of the capitalist powers.

An appeal by workers in Canada for a joint struggle with their class brothers and sisters in the US, Mexico and beyond would meet with powerful support. Unpaid work is just as burning an issue for flight attendants in the US. Through new technologies—such as precision-scheduled railroading across North America’s rail networks or dynamic routing at Canada Post and US delivery companies—workers in every sector are being driven to the breaking point in the pursuit of capitalist profit.

The principal obstacle to waging such a struggle is the nationalist, pro-capitalist trade union bureaucracy. The union leaderships are doubling down on their appeals to the Carney government for close cooperation.

On Sunday, the Canadian Labour Congress released a statement following an emergency meeting that pleaded with Carney to withdraw the strike ban and work to achieve a “fair deal” for Air Canada workers through the bargaining process. But there can be no talk of a “fair deal” for workers through negotiations involving a government that is waging a class war on behalf of the bosses. What the bureaucrats are

really asking Carney to do is acknowledge their role in enforcing further savage attacks on flight attendants and other workers.

The statement included the foul nationalist assertion that Carney—who has spent his entire adult life as a servant of the financial oligarchy—was “elected to fight against Trump, … to protect our jobs and our communities.” This is a lie, aimed at pitting workers against each other in a nationalist trade war led by the very same capitalists and their political mouthpieces who are assaulting workers’ jobs, wages and conditions.

The role of the Canadian union apparatus in whipping up nationalist propaganda as the class struggle intensifies is far from unique. In the United States, the United Auto Workers and other unions have lined up behind Trump’s reactionary “America First” tariffs. UAW President Shawn Fain has donned T-shirts featuring B-24 bombers and the slogan “arsenal of democracy”—a direct reference to the unions’ alliance with the ruling class in suppressing strikes during World War II in the interests of American imperialism.

In Europe, the union apparatus stands in the front ranks of the imperialist powers’ massive rearmament drive, which is fueling the ruling elite’s assault on what remains of workers’ democratic and social rights across the continent.

The Air Canada strike shows that workers are striving to assert their class interests. To succeed, they must abolish the bureaucratized trade union apparatus and transfer power back to the rank and file, where it belongs.

The International Committee of the Fourth International and its Socialist Equality Parties have initiated the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) to provide the organizational and political means for this struggle. Through the development of rank-and-file committees, workers can advance demands based on their needs, not corporate profit; counter the sabotage of the bureaucracy; and mobilize their immense social power in coordinated struggles across industries, borders and continents.

The development of the IWA-RFC is a crucial element in the fight to arm the growing upsurge of the working class with a socialist-internationalist program—one that must guide the struggle against imperialist war, dictatorship and the destruction of workers’ social and democratic rights, and for workers’ power.



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