

10,000 Air Canada flight attendants defy Liberal back-to-work order for second day

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Air Canada flight attendants maintained their picket lines on Monday, defying a Liberal government strikebreaking order for the second day.

The work stoppage, which began shortly after midnight Friday, is a militant struggle that has brought operations at the country's largest airline to a halt and has now thrown the big business Liberal government into crisis.

The walkout involves roughly 10,500 cabin crew, who are members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). It continues in defiance of a Canada Industrial Relations Board (CIRB) order, under Section 107 of the Canada Labour Code, directing the flight attendants to return to work by 2:00 p.m. Eastern Time Sunday. A Monday morning CIRB ruling, which declared the continuing strike to be illegal and set a noon deadline, was similarly defied. Air Canada management has declared that it now plans to resume operations on Tuesday.

Initially the company had refused CUPE's call for a resumption of negotiations, amid a flurry of denunciations of the union and workers for striking illegally. But late Monday evening, CUPE announced that negotiations were resuming under government mediator William Kaplan, who recently authored a report castigating postal workers for resisting Canada Post's attempt to restructure the Crown corporation at their and the public's expense.

The back-to-work order, issued by the CIRB at the direction of Liberal Jobs Minister Patty Hajdu, reflects the federal government's increasing reliance on effective rule by decree to enforce big business' labor priorities, dispensing with traditional democratic fig leaves, such as strike-breaking legislation passed in Parliament. The unelected CIRB—which includes former Air Canada counsel Maryse Tremblay and ex-CUPE President Paul Moist—functions as little more than a rubber stamp for government strikebreaking.

Asked about the continuing strike Monday morning, Prime Minister Mark Carney called for a resolution “as quickly as possible.” While the former central banker joined this with a call for flight attendants to be compensated “equitably at all times, fairly at all times,” he did not outline what further actions his government might take to compel flight attendants to go back to their jobs or what its response would be to continued defiance.

While no fines have yet been announced, under the Labour Code, CUPE faces up to \$1,000 per day and \$10,000 per officer who authorized the action. A finding of contempt of court in defiance of a CIRB order could result in the jailing of union leaders.

CUPE President Mark Hancock, who symbolically ripped up the government's back-to-work order at a rally Sunday, struck a militant pose Monday afternoon in the face of these possible penalties, telling

a press conference, “If it means folks like me going to jail, then so be it. If it means our union being fined, then so be it. We are looking for a solution here, our members want a solution here, but that solution has to be found at a bargaining table.”

Hancock's statement makes clear that CUPE has no intention of turning the Air Canada strike into the springboard for a wider mobilization of the working class. His militant posturing is aimed at containing the struggle within the straitjacket of collective bargaining and the pro-employer Canada Labour Code.

That the union bureaucracy's priority remains maintaining its own authority over the rank and file rather than building a broader, militant working class response was made clear by Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) President Bea Bruske. She announced Sunday that the members of the national labour federation had met to endorse defiance of the back-to-work order while calling on the Carney government to “do the right thing” by rescinding the CIRB ruling under Section 107, refraining from using it in the future and subsequently repealing it from the Labour Code.

“Prime Minister Carney was elected to fight against Trump, not to undermine the rights of Canada's workers. This government was elected to protect our jobs and our communities, not to support corporations like Air Canada that demand free work from their employees,” Bruske declared. “It's time to do the right thing and respect Canadian workers' right to collective bargaining.”

Unifor President Lana Payne similarly called for the government to back track on its strikebreaking, noting that the collective bargaining framework is necessary for suppressing the class struggle. “The government is condoning Air Canada's refusal to bargain fairly while blocking workers' legitimate fight against unpaid work. Workers have constitutional rights in this country, and we expect our own government to uphold them. My message to these same federal employers, many of whom Unifor also bargains with, is to consider hard on what you are sowing, because here's the truth: suppressing the rights of workers will never bring you labour peace.”

Magali Picard, president of the Quebec Federation of Labour, pointed to the passage of the anti-strike Bill 89 by the right-wing CAQ provincial government which follows the mold set by the federal Liberals. “Federal intervention through Section 107 of the Canada Labour Code is a pattern that is repeating itself and becoming the norm in employers' bargaining strategies. We let negotiations fester, and then we'll cry on the government's shoulders, asking them to intervene under false pretenses. I predict this is also what will happen in Quebec following the adoption by the CAQ and François Legault's government of Bill 89, which limits the right to strike.” What Picard did not explain is that the unions in Quebec have done nothing to

mobilize workers against this dictatorial assault on their rights.

Meanwhile, many union bureaucrats have remained studiously silent on the eruption of the struggle at Air Canada seeking to keep the working class divided by employer, profession and region. Despite 55,000 Canada Post workers being in a strike position after confronting federal strikebreaking under Section 107, the Canadian Union of Postal Workers' only statement so far has been to complain that the strike has delayed their planned talks this week with Canada Post management. CUPW has restricted workers to an overtime ban since May and made no effort to mobilize in coordination with the flight attendants.

The union-backed NDP has rallied behind the strike and the flight attendants' defiance as a means of boosting its position following its worst ever showing in this year's parliamentary elections after close to a decade of propping up the hated Liberals under Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. A statement by the party published Friday called on the Carney government to "allow collective bargaining to run its course and avoid creating incentives for the employer to walk away from the table."

Meanwhile, Ontario NDP leader Marit Stiles appealed Monday to Tory Premier Doug Ford to intercede on flight attendants' behalf in his meeting with Carney and ask him to rescind the back-to-work order under Section 107 of the Canada Labour Code. Stiles wrote in her letter: "I am calling on you to defend Ontario's workers by speaking up. Urge [Carney] to reverse his government's decision to legislate flight attendants back to work under s.107 and call on him to demand that Air Canada end this dispute with a fair deal reached at the bargaining table—one that sees flight attendants paid for their work. Working people in Ontario need their Premier to stand up for them, respect their labour and uphold the right to free and fair collective bargaining."

The hard-right Ford, who has overseen a wide array of corrupt business dealings at the expense of workers in Ontario, preemptively banned a strike by low paid school support staff in 2023. The defiance of the workers, who walked out anyhow, sparked the development of demands for a general strike against the Ford government, and he was only saved by a backroom deal cut by the CLC, CUPW and Unifor.

Ford, for his part, dismissed Stiles' appeal, insisting Monday the back-to-work order was necessary to "keep the airlines moving."

The Air Canada flight attendants strike follows the breakdown of contract negotiations after the expiration in March of the decade-long agreement signed in 2015 and negotiated by CUPE. That agreement locked workers into stagnant wages while inflation steadily eroded their real incomes. Current annual pay for Air Canada flight attendants averages around \$53,000, with new hires potentially earning less than \$40,000 annually depending on hours and route assignments. Over the past 25 years, entry-level wages for new crews have risen by roughly 10 percent, leaving many workers effectively in low-income conditions despite the airline's profitability.

A major point of contention is the fact that significant duties performed before takeoff and after landing—including safety inspections and passenger assistance—are unpaid, with wages commencing only once the aircraft departs the gate.

Air Canada proposed a four-year deal it described as a "generous" 38 percent pay increase, including a 25 percent raise in the first year, enhanced compensation for pre-flight duties, and adjustments to pensions and rest periods. Analysts note that the effective real wage increase under this offer is closer to 17 percent, leaving unresolved the question of unpaid work and the broader economic pressures on flight

attendants.

The flight attendants' defiance is a major development in the class struggle in Canada and internationally. It exposes the hollowness of the "Elbows Up" Canadian nationalism and the hypocrisy of the entire capitalist political establishment. The Liberal government, first under Trudeau and now Carney, deploys Section 107 and back-to-work diktats to enforce concessions while pursuing a vast expansion of military spending. Billions are being funneled into rearmament and preparations for war, with talk of boosting military expenditures to 5 percent of GDP, while workers are told to accept wage stagnation, speedup and attacks on basic rights.

The union bureaucracy and its political adjunct, the NDP, are not leading a genuine fight against this assault but scrambling to contain it. Their calls for the "right to collective bargaining" amount to pleas for a seat at the table in enforcing concessions rather than organizing a unified struggle of the working class against the corporate-state offensive. Across the railroads, the docks and postal services, the unions have enforced Section 107 orders and kept workers isolated, ensuring that militant resistance remains fragmented and ineffective.

The determination of flight attendants to continue their strike in the face of government threats, employer intransigence and the union apparatus's determination to capitulate demonstrates that the working class has its own independent agenda. This agenda finds no expression in any section of the political establishment or union bureaucracy.

The way forward is not in appealing to Carney or relying on CUPE, the CLC or the NDP. Workers must build rank-and-file committees to seize control of the struggle, link up with other sections of workers in Canada, the US and internationally and fight on an independent, socialist basis.

A successful fight will require a break with the bankrupt framework of collective bargaining under the Canada Labour Code and the building of rank-and-file committees, controlled directly by workers themselves. Such committees can unify flight attendants with postal workers, dockers, rail workers and others across Canada, while linking their struggle with airline workers and transport workers in the United States and internationally who confront the same corporate drive for profits at the expense of working conditions and rights.

As Daniel Berkeley of the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee (Canada) put it in a statement to the WSWS: "This is an important initial step in your struggle, but if this strike is left in the hands of your union, it will wither on the vine. Build Rank-and-File Committees and appeal to all Canadian workers who have a stake in defending the right to strike, who are desperate for better working conditions and wages, and who can rally around similar issues to fight off the bosses and government institutions who are backed up by various union apparatuses."



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