CUPE suppresses Air Canada flight attendants strike in late-night backroom deal

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The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) announced in the early hours of Tuesday morning that it had reached a tentative agreement with Air Canada to shut down the strike by 10,000 flight attendants at Air Canada and its subsidiary Air Canada Rouge. The strike, which erupted last Saturday, was the first national walkout by the cabin crew at the country's largest carrier in 40 years and had quickly paralyzed its operations worldwide. It was waged in opposition to the Liberal government's attempt to suppress the strike using the anti-democratic powers contained in the Canada Labour Code.

CUPE's shutting down of the strike without giving workers any clue as to what is in the tentative agreement and without a vote marks a clear betrayal. It comes after flight attendants, in a courageous stand, had openly defied the Liberal government's invocation of Section 107 of the Canada Labour Code—a provision recently "reinterpreted" to allow the state to unilaterally declare strikes illegal and impose binding arbitration.

Less than 12 hours after the strike began, Jobs Minister Patty Hajdu invoked Section 107 to criminalize the walkout. For more than two days, the workers continued their action in defiance of the strikebreaking initiative, throwing the government of Prime Minister Mark Carney into a deep political crisis.

The Air Canada strikers' defiance of Section 107 was unprecedented since the previous Liberal government under Justin Trudeau innovated its use to shut down strikes without having to pass back-to-work legislation through parliament. The Liberal government used Section 107 to target workers in a number of key economic sectors, including on the rails, docks and at Canada Post. Each time, the respective union or unions collaborated in enforcing the back-to-work order.

The flight attendants' militant action in the face of threatened fines and possible jail time shattered the complacent assumption within ruling circles that workers could be cowed by injunctions and "law and order" threats. The strike expressed the deep social anger accumulated after years of stagnant or falling real wages, abusive scheduling practices, and the imposition of an estimated average of more than 35 hours of unpaid work per month.

CUPE's cutting a deal in the dark of night to restart operations was not a victory but an act of sabotage aimed at saving the government, Air Canada and the entire corporate establishment from a movement that threatened to spiral out of their control and mobilize broader sections of the working class who face the same exploitative working conditions and declining living standards as flight attendants.

Flight attendants voted 99 percent in favor of strike action on a turnout exceeding 94 percent—figures that demonstrate overwhelming determination. Their defiance won powerful sympathy from workers across Canada and internationally, who face the same attacks on wages, conditions and the right to strike.

But CUPE, which for decades has functioned as an arm of the corporations and governments in suppressing the working class, acted with ruthless speed to suppress the strike, which had continued only under pressure from the rank and file. Without releasing any details of the tentative settlement, it ordered a return to work.

What the unions, the Liberal government and big business feared most was that the flight attendants' defiance of the back-to-work order would spread and mobilize broader sections of the working class across Canada, North America and globally.

The union bureaucracy's claim that the deal represents "transformational change" and that "Unpaid work is over" because it abolishes unpaid ground duties is a fraud. Air Canada had already offered to pay 50 percent of the wage rate for such work prior to the strike. That CUPE trumpets this as a breakthrough only confirms that workers will be paid far below their full wage rate, while other concessions—on scheduling, staffing levels, or health benefits—are almost certainly included in the deal to offset costs.

Admitting that many flight attendants were slaving for poverty wages less than a "living wage," Air Canada chief operations officer Mark Nasr told Global News of the tentative agreement, "It will include ground pay, it will include much-needed raises to get to a living wage for our more junior flight attendants and many other aspects that will make this the right package that recognizes all of their tremendous contributions."

Flight attendants must follow the powerful momentum of their strike with a decisive rejection of this sellout and vote "No" when they are eventually given the opportunity.

The flight attendants' defiance of Section 107 opened up a serious political crisis for the newly minted government of the former central banker Carney. Less than four months after replacing Justin Trudeau as leader, the Prime Minister confronted the prospect of an open rebellion of workers against the government strike ban. This rebellion exposed the fraudulent nationalist rhetoric of "Team Canada" and "national unity" deployed by the ruling elite—with the full support of the union bureaucracy and the social democratic NDP—while pursuing austerity, militarism and a reactionary trade war with the United States.

Cynically welcoming the agreement to end the strike, Carney posted on X Tuesday, "I am relieved that Air Canada and the Canadian Union of Public Employees have reached a tentative agreement early this morning. It is my hope that this will ensure flight attendants are

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compensated fairly at all times, while ending disruption for hundreds of thousands of Canadian families, workers, and visitors to Canada."

Hajdu issued a similar statement dripping with hypocrisy, while hailing an announced government "probe" of the question of unpaid work. Having issued the order to break the flight attendants strike and enforce arbitration on behalf of Air Canada management, Hajdu declared, "The best agreements are the ones made at the table. I am relieved that the parties agreed to meet together last night. Throughout our ongoing meetings I strongly urged them to find a deal together at the table."

Carney's government, with the full support of big business and the corporate media, has both followed on and dramatically intensified the Trudeau Liberal government's drive to swell capitalist profits and advance Canadian imperialist interests. This includes illegalizing the Air Canada strike, and forcing Canada Post workers, whose month-long walkout was outlawed last December under Section 107, to vote on Canada Post's concessions-filled "best and final" contract offers.

What the flight attendants' bold defiance proved is that the working class is no longer willing to quietly accept the abolition of the right to strike, and the imposition of a dictatorship in the workplace where workers' terms of employment are determined by binding arbitration.

The strike revealed the immense power of the working class. With Air Canada responsible for more than half the nation's passenger capacity, the walkout disrupted thousands of flights and threatened to ripple across the global airline industry. The government and corporate elite were compelled to intervene not from a position of strength but out of fear that the strike would ignite a broader movement.

CUPE's betrayal was therefore not just a retreat imposed on the rank and file but a calculated political maneuver to staunch a developing class confrontation, and allow the ruling class to regroup and press forward with the evisceration of workers' democratic and social rights.

The sellout at Air Canada recalls nothing so much as CUPE and the unions' suppression of the November 2022 strike by 55,000 Ontario education workers. That strike began with the low-paid workers defying Premier Doug Ford's preemptive anti-strike law banning job action.

Mass solidarity developed among workers across the province, including calls for a general strike. CUPE and other major Canadian unions entered backroom talks with Ford to persuade him to withdraw his strike ban in exchange for the calling off of the strike without any of the workers' demands being met. The unions' intervention rescued Ford from an impending political mass movement of the working class that the unions feared they could not have controlled. Within weeks of sabotaging the struggle, CUPE rammed through an agreement on the education workers that contained many of the key concessions Ford's government had tried to impose by means of the original strike ban.

In both cases, the union bureaucracy—including the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) and Unifor—acted as the guarantor of state authority, claiming to be opposed to strike bans while at the same time enforcing concessions and isolating the struggles to prevent them from becoming the spearhead of a wider working-class movement.

The betrayal of the flight attendants cannot be understood apart from the broader political orientation of the union bureaucracy. CUPE and the CLC are central partners of the Liberal government in promoting a foul campaign of economic nationalism, urging workers to rally behind "Team Canada" in trade conflicts with Washington and Beijing.

This nationalism serves to tie the working class to Canadian imperialism's global ambitions. Carney has pledged tens of billions in increased military spending over the coming decade, and is expanding Canadian participation in US-led military operations, including Trump's proposed Golden Dome missile shield, in hopes of securing Canadian imperialism's place in a renewed North American economic and military bloc.

The unions' role is to smother opposition at home while whipping up nationalism to divide workers and justify austerity. Just as the United Auto Workers in the U.S. has embraced Trump's "America First" tariffs and militarism, Canadian unions have rallied behind Carney in the name of "defending jobs" and "protecting communities." In reality, they are defending the profits of Canadian corporations and the geopolitical interests of the Canadian ruling class.

Despite CUPE's betrayal, the Air Canada flight attendants' strike stands as a critical turning point in the class struggle. For three days, workers defied not only their employer but the government and the state. They demonstrated that workers can defy anti-democratic strike bans and begin to mount a counter-offensive. But their struggle was strangled by the union bureaucracy, which subordinated their demands to the needs of Canadian capitalism.

The lessons are clear. Workers cannot leave their struggles in the hands of the CLC, Unifor, CUPE, CUPW or any section of the nationalist, pro-capitalist union apparatus. To advance their fight, flight attendants must form independent rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves and committed to fight back against state repression and capitalist diktats. These committees should reach out to pilots, ground crews, maintenance workers, and airline staff across North America, where unpaid work and falling real wages are just as burning an issue.

Above all, the struggle must be guided by a socialist and internationalist strategy. The ruling class is waging a global offensive of austerity, authoritarianism and war. The working class must respond by uniting across borders, industries and continents in a common struggle against capitalism.

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 precisely this organizational and political framework. Through the building of such committees, workers can articulate demands based on their needs—not corporate profit—and overcome the sabotage of the bureaucracies, wielding their immense social power in coordinated, international struggles.

The flight attendants' defiance of Section 107 exposed the fragility of the ruling class and the immense potential power of the working class. To realize that potential, their struggle must be continued on a new basis: against the sellouts of the union bureaucracy, against capitalism, and for the socialist reorganization of society to meet human need, not private profit.

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