Air Canada workers denounce government strikebreaking from the picket line: “There is no right to strike in Canada”

Our reporters
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Over 10,000 Air Canada flight attendants courageously defied a federal Liberal government back-to-work order to continue their strike against intolerable working conditions and real wage cuts. After three days on the picket line beginning Saturday, the strikers saw their struggle sabotaged and sold out early Tuesday by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), which concluded a rotten agreement with management and a government-appointed mediator with a notorious record of imposing deep concessions on workers.

In conversations with *World Socialist Web Site* reporters Monday, Air Canada workers emphasized their determination to fight and explained how the issues they were fighting for are questions of burning relevance to all workers. It was precisely because of the potential for the strike to become the catalyst for a much broader movement against ruthless exploitation, capitalist austerity and state strikebreaking that the CUPE bureaucracy, backed by Unifor and the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), did all it could to shut it down as quickly as possible.

A union steward on the picket line at Ottawa Airport said:

> Our position right now is that the government does not have the right to quash the quasi-constitutional rights in our laws that say that workers have the right to unite. This law was the same one used against the postal workers and the legal track takes a lot of time to get a ruling on anything, it has to make its way up to the Supreme Court unfortunately. … Seeing as how they are doing it repeatedly now, there is no right to strike in Canada.

The worker stressed the need to appeal to other sections of workers to join the struggle. In the past year alone, the Liberal government has used the same Section 107 of the Canada Labour Code to unilaterally criminalize strikes by rail workers, postal workers and dockers, bypassing Parliament. The worker said:

> We should be uniting, we should be fighting and we should be standing here. They say that CUPE will be expanding this action, but I don’t know what form that is going to take. If you heard the remarks from our president yesterday, this is a fight that is much bigger than the Air Canada workers. Management tried to force us back to work using the CIRB (Canada Industrial Relations Board), people were getting calls from the employers saying you have to report back to work.

The militant bluster of leading CUPE officials, including National President Mark Hancock, was aimed above all at maintaining political control over the Air Canada strikers, who are outraged by their conditions and determined to fight back. But this was a two-faced policy. At the same time as Hancock loudly told a press conference Monday that he was “ready to go to prison” to defend workers’ right to strike against the government, CUPE officials were preparing to resume talks with Air Canada management under the leadership of government-appointed mediator Robert Kaplan. Kaplan was the chair of the Independent Inquiry Commission (IIC) into Canada Post earlier this year, a body that issued recommendations legitimizing the “Amazonification” of the postal service through the use of low-paid, precariously employed workers, the adoption of seven-day-a-week delivery and the ending of home delivery.

Two flight attendants told the WSWS in Ottawa:

> We all have to stick together—We can’t have any strays.
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> If they want to designate us as essential workers [which would prohibit them from striking under Canadian law], then they need to give us the pay of essential workers.
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> This is happening everywhere. We are still waiting to hear if we are going back to work.
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> We are getting some public workers, some postal

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> workers, some members from OPSEU (Ontario Public Service Employees Union) here, so we've been getting some support.
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> We're not deemed an essential service, and it would be in our contract—no striking allowed—if we were an essential service, but we're not. They tried this in 2014, and it didn't work; and then Lisa Raitt and Stephen Harper deemed it a hardship on the economy and yet look what he did to the public services—he razed them!

They also denounced the current Liberal government, commenting, "They're taking away the rights of all union workers and all Canadians away by not allowing us to strike."

One of the workers explained that while they no longer worked for Air Canada, they came to the picket line to show solidarity with the strikers:

> I'm actually no longer with Air Canada. I retired, and now I'm with Porter (Airlines), and we just unionized. So some of us came down to support because we are also with CUPE now, and we want fair conditions for our flight attendants just like Air Canada, and it's not just themselves now. We are here for every union person. Yes, passengers got stranded, but a snowstorm would do that.

Workers were eager to discuss the broader political context within which the strike took place, including the Canadian ruling class's turn to policies of war and support for Israel's genocide against the Palestinians. After a WSWS reporter explained that all of the established parties defend the capitalist profit system and the interests of the bosses against the workers, one worker among a group of three listening responded, "All of them are responsible for what's going on in Gaza."

At a rally in support of the strike Sunday morning in Montreal, workers were also in a fighting mood. Some expressed anger over the government's strike ban, with one declaring, "Is our government becoming a Trump government?"

Daniel Berkley, a leading member of the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee (PWRFC), sent a statement of solidarity to the Air Canada strikers. The PWRFC was established in June 2024 by postal workers determined to take control of their contract fight away from the Canadian Union of Postal Workers' (CUPW) bureaucracy and broaden their fight for decent-paying, secure jobs into an industrial and political counteroffensive involving all workers. Berkley wrote:

> I call on postal workers to join Air Canada workers in a solidarity strike! We are currently in a legal strike position, but our union has called for the government to impose binding arbitration, taking away our right to strike and even vote on our contract, while they waste our time and deepen our demoralization with an ineffective overtime ban.
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> Together, we have the opportunity to broaden our struggles across industry lines! Together, we have the opportunity to fight for our right to strike! Together, we have the opportunity to fight to protect all public services, to fight for workers' control over new technologies, and to fight for a decent work-life balance, safe and well-paying jobs!
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> Like postal workers, flight attendants have been pushed too far on too many issues, and our response is informed with increasing militancy. To be clear: I am referring to the rank-and-file workers who have been bullied and pushed around. The expectations for us to take on extra work with no extra pay is one of the issues we are fighting over. Canada Post and the union call it "dynamic routing," but we frontline workers see it for what it is: "gigification" to bring profitability and ultimately privatization to the post office, at the expense of public services and working conditions.

It was the fear of such a unified struggle drawing Air Canada workers, postal workers and others together in a movement breaking out of the pro-employer straitjacket that prompted the CUPE leadership to do everything in its power to halt the strike as soon as possible. The despicable manner in which this was done, with a brief statement in the dead of night that provided no details to the strikers about what was agreed to, underlines the urgent necessity for workers to build rank-and-file committees to advance their demands, and reject the nationalist, pro-capitalist framework imposed on them by the union bureaucracy by building the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

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