

Details of CUPE's sellout of Air Canada workers emerge, as pseudo-left seeks to conceal union bureaucracy's betrayal

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Details have now emerged of the backroom concessions contract struck between the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and Air Canada early Tuesday morning, and of the thoroughly anti-democratic methods that the bureaucracy is now employing to ram it through.

The tentative agreement sabotaged the courageous defiance by over 10,500 flight attendants of a Liberal government strikebreaking order. That order was dictated by Jobs Minister Patty Hajdu on Saturday, August 16, less than 12 hours after the strike began, using the arbitrary, anti-democratic provisions of Section 107 of the Canada Labour Code.

In bringing a quick end to the strike, the CUPE leadership, working in close concert with the top brass of the Canadian Labour Congress, came to the rescue not only of the management and shareholders of Canada's largest air carrier. They stanched a working-class challenge to the big business Mark Carney-led Liberal government that had manifestly thrown it into crisis, and could have become the catalyst for a mass movement against capitalist austerity, war and state-strikebreaking.

Under the proposed four-year contract, Air Canada is not offering a single penny more in wage increases to the majority of flight attendants above its derisory pre-strike offer.

The agreement calls for an 8 percent increase retroactive to the previous contract's expiry on March 31, 2025; 3 percent in year two of the contract; 2.5 percent in year three; and 2.75 percent in the fourth and final year. This under conditions where flight attendants' real wages were massively eroded by inflation under the decade long-contract CUPE locked them into in 2015.

Only the lowest paid workers, those with less than 5 years' seniority would receive more than Air Canada's previous offer. In the first year, they would get an additional pay rise of 4 percent, or 12 percent all told.

So far short does this fall of flight attendants' needs that the CUPE bureaucracy is trying to distance itself from the terms of the agreement under which it ordered workers back on the job. It has claimed that it is taking a "neutral position" on the wage settlement, and not formally recommending it to the rank-and-file.

CUPE deceit over the purported "end" to "unpaid work"

Under the last agreement, Air Canada flight attendants received no pay for pre-flight and post-flight work, including safety procedures and deplaning. This led to a situation where the average worker was performing 35 hours of unpaid labour per month. Many flight attendants earn poverty wages as a result, with some low-seniority workers earning substantially less than \$40,000 per year, depending on scheduling.

Under the CUPE-negotiated tentative agreement, flight attendants on narrowbody aircraft, also known as single-aisle aircraft, would receive ground pay for one hour per flight at 50 per cent of their regular hourly wage rate, while those on widebody aircraft would be paid at the same rate but for ten minutes more or 70 minutes.

Starting next April, the percentage would be bumped to 60%, to 65% in April 2027 and to 70% in April 2028. This means that many workers would receive less than the federal minimum wage for their ground work.

As a result of the workers' militant stand, Air Canada had been obliged even prior to the strike to concede that flight attendants would be paid at 50% of their regular wage rate for an hour of pre-flight activities. With the tentative agreement, CUPE has tweaked this, enshrining that ground work shall be paid at far less than the basic wage rate, that is if workers are remunerated at all.

Underscoring that the bureaucracy is fully aware of the fact that it has sold out the flight attendants, it is denying them the right to vote on the portion of the agreement related to pre-flight pay and all other aspects of the agreement, other than the wage schedule.

CUPE's media office did not respond to a *World Socialist Web Site* inquiry for clarification on what the legal basis is for the bureaucracy robbing workers of their right to vote on key provisions of the new agreement. It could well be the very Section 107 of the Canada Labour Code that the union bureaucrats made such a hullabaloo about "fighting" in order to maintain political control over the rank and file's courageous defiance of the government's strike ban. Whatever the case, this is a gross violation of workers' rights. It underscores that the union's main goal was to put an end to the strike in collusion with management and the government.

Even the wages portion of the agreement that the CUPE bureaucracy has designed to permit workers to vote on between August 27 and September 6 is essentially a fait accompli. If workers reject it, there will be three days of mediation, followed by binding arbitration overseen by a government appointee.

As the details of the agreement have become known, anger among the rank and file has quickly mounted. Union officials have been peppered with angry questions and comments at CUPE Zoom meetings.

The union bureaucracy and its pseudo-left cheerleaders, meanwhile, have unleashed a barrage of propaganda to conceal what has taken place.

CUPE declares that the tentative agreement contains "transformational change" and claims that "unpaid work is over." This is a flat out lie. Flight attendants will only be paid for ground work before a flight. Ground work which occurs at the end of a flight, including helping passengers deplane and directing people to gates etc., will remain unpaid.

The average hourly rate for Air Canada flight attendants is \$29 per hour, according to Indeed.com. Going by the cost of an average apartment in

Toronto, Canada's main air transport hub where many Air Canada workers live, wages would need to double just to match inflation. In 2015, an average 1-bedroom apartment in Toronto cost \$1100 per month. The average cost is now \$2195. Grocery prices have increased 45 percent.

Meanwhile, Air Canada investors have made out like bandits. \$10,000 invested in Air Canada stock in 2015 was worth nearly \$50,000 in 2020—a gain of 400 percent—before the COVID 19 pandemic shut down air travel, sending airline stocks tumbling. That investment is worth \$16,200 today, a gain of 60 percent. In comparison, a flight attendant's wages have lost 50 percent of their purchasing power.

The bureaucracy defends its corporatist partnership with the Carney government

These intolerable working conditions drove 99 percent of Air Canada workers to vote for a strike on a turnout of 94 percent, and defy the government's back-to-work order.

This defiance created a political crisis for the Carney government, with whom the union bureaucracies, including CUPE, are united in a corporatist "Team Canada" alliance to "save" Canada and capitalist profits. After months of droning on about how "Canadians" are "all in this together" in the face of the Trump administration's annexation threats and trade war measures, the union bureaucracies showed where their true class allegiances lie by conniving with the government and Air Canada management to stab the workers in the back so as to uphold corporate Canada's profits and protect the union bureaucracy's corporatist privileges.

As workers were defying the back-to-work order, the Canadian Labour Congress convened an "emergency" meeting of top bureaucrats in order to determine how to retain control over the situation and save its political allies in the Carney government. They released a statement purporting to express "solidarity" with the strikers, which was in reality an appeal for the Carney government not to dispense with the services of the union bureaucracy in suppressing strikes and ramming through concessions. The political purpose of the statement was summed up in a passage claiming that Carney, a man who has served the financial oligarchy his entire adult life as a central banker, was "elected to fight against Trump, ... to protect our jobs and our communities."

To strike a posture of defiance before the militant strikers, CUPE national president Mark Hancock declared demagogically at a Monday press conference that he was "ready to go to jail" to defend the workers' right to strike. In fact, he was ready to perform any stunt for the cameras to keep workers trapped within the straitjacket of the rigged collective bargaining system at the very moment when his CUPE colleagues were preparing to enter marathon talks with Air Canada bosses to conclude their late-night sellout of the strike.

The Liberal government is determined to make workers pay for a massive transfer of wealth from the bottom to the top of society. This is expressed at the highest level in its drive to massively rearm, shifting billions from social spending to spending on the waging of war around the world to uphold the interests of Canadian imperialism. The government's union "partners" are indispensable in this process because they confine workers' struggles to the pro-employer "collective bargaining" framework and enforce the dictates of the corporate elite.

Pseudo-left organizations serve as attorneys for the CUPE bureaucracy

The importance of the political cover provided by a series of pseudo-left groups to the bureaucracy has become especially evident following its betrayal of the Air Canada strike. In varying keys, they seek to cover over the bitter conflict between the union leaderships and the rank and file, and the bureaucracy's partnership with the government and big business.

Spring Magazine, which is published by a right-wing split-off from the state capitalist International Socialists, was most brazen in declaring that Air Canada workers had achieved a victory. Writing on X, Krisna Saravanamuttu declared, "Flight attendants defied a Section 107 back-to-work order, forcing Air Canada back to the table, and reached a tentative agreement. This sets a powerful precedent: only workers decide when a strike ends—not the federal government or its corporate friends."

This is a pack of lies. It takes nothing away from the courage displayed by Air Canada workers in defying the government to acknowledge the reality that they had absolutely no say on when their strike ended or the tentative agreement concluded behind their backs. It was the "Liberal government and its corporate [and union bureaucracy] friends" who determined when the strike would end, and they did so above all to protect the Carney government's political authority.

The defiance of the government's strike ban took place because of the determination of rank-and-file workers, not the CUPE leadership, to fight. "CUPE's plans," as was to become clear just hours later, were to sabotage the workers' defiance at the first possible opportunity.

The Revolutionary Communist Party, which is affiliated with the misnamed Grant-ite Revolutionary Communist International, attempted a more sophisticated defence of the bureaucracy, declaring that "the union" as a whole, not the rank and file, "defied the law," but that the leaders inexplicably accepted a "bad deal." Its criticisms, such as they were, were entirely limited to the "bread and butter" terms of the contract, leaving totally aside the union bureaucracy's role in stifling the class struggle to prop up the big business Carney Liberal government and the union-NDP-Liberal alliance, which for decades has served as a key mechanism for enforcing the ruling class' program of austerity and imperialist aggression and war. The RCP article on the Air Canada settlement concluded with the claim that as the class struggle intensifies "leaders will be pushed into action or tossed aside and more militant leaders—ones who will genuinely fight for the interests of the workers—will come to the fore" within the existing union apparatuses and collective bargaining framework.

The problem facing workers is not a lack of militancy. Rather they confront a union bureaucracy comprised of a caste of high-paid functionaries with interests alien and opposed to those of the workers they claim to represent. This finds its clearest expression in the union bureaucracy's integration into corporatist partnerships with the bosses and state, which uphold the interests of Canadian imperialism by imposing the costs of rearmament and corporate handouts onto the workers' backs.

Air Canada workers and other sections of the working class can only take forward their struggles for decent-paying, secure jobs, and well-funded public services by adopting an entirely new strategy. Every major workers' struggle in the present situation takes the form of a political fight not just against one specific employer, but all of corporate Canada, its government, and partners in the union bureaucracy. This struggle requires the construction of new forms of organization—rank-and-file committees to unify workers across sectional lines and with their class brothers and sisters internationally—and the adoption of a socialist and internationalist program to fight for human need, not private profit, to determine social life.



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