Canadian Union of Postal Workers' response to Air Canada flight attendants' defiance of government strikebreaking: silence

Daniel Berkley
27 August 2025

The World Socialist Web Site received the following comment from Daniel Berkley, a leading member of the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee (PWRFC). The PWRFC was established by postal workers in June 2024 to combat the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) bureaucracy as it worked to sabotage their struggle. The PWRFC calls for postal workers across Canada to make their contract struggle the spearhead of a broader industrial and political struggle by the working class in defence of public services, the right to strike and good-paying, secure jobs. Get involved with the PWRFC by filling out the form at the end of this article.

My name is Daniel Berkley, and I work for Canada Post as a rural postal worker. I found it remarkable that the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) leadership said absolutely nothing publicly about the recent strike by 10,500 flight attendants, who defied the government's use of the same provision in the Canada Labour Code (CLC) that was deployed last December to criminalize our strike.

The Liberal government shut down our strike with CUPW's connivance using Section 107 of the CLC after we had been on the picket lines for a month. After just 12 hours of their strike earlier this month, flight attendants were faced with the government employing the same measure, which allows the Labour Minister to unilaterally order the end of a strike.

When the Liberals deployed Section 107 in December, CUPW enforced it, ordering us back to work without so much as a mass meeting to discuss our response, never mind a vote. Since then, they've done everything to isolate us in the face of a concerted onslaught from the government and all of corporate Canada. If the CUPW had their way, our struggle would be resolved via binding arbitration. A government-appointed arbitrator would set the conditions of our employment, and we would not even have the opportunity to vote on it. The sweeping concessions the corporation and the union are looking for, which would "Amazonify" our jobs, would never pass a democratic vote.

Like our strike, the flight attendants' struggle developed from the outset as a political battle against the government and the employer. The workers wanted to put an end to unpaid labour, which sees them working for free while planes are on the ground for up to 35 hours a month. They courageously defied the government when it sought to impose a Section 107 order to ban their strike. This was a powerful demonstration that workers are ready to fight. It provided us with a great opportunity to unify our struggle with the flight attendants and take a major step in expanding a movement for better wages and conditions. CUPW did everything in its power to ensure that this didn't happen by keeping silent throughout.

We are facing the same fundamental issues at Canada Post (the right to strike, and wages that don't keep up with inflation, to name just two issues). Moreover, our enemies are the same, as shown by the intervention of the government into both of our strikes. But the CUPW didn't see fit to make so much as a statement of support.

First, the CUPW bureaucracy was not roused by the government's invocation of Section 107 to make a condemnation of this outrageous attack on all workers' right to strike. Then, after it became clear that flight attendants were bravely defying the government and all of corporate Canada, CUPW failed to breathe even a word of solidarity, let alone encourage postal workers to take any action to materially support the strikers. In this way, they helped CUPE (Canadian Union of Public Employees) isolate and ultimately defeat the flight attendants' strike.

The CUPW bureaucrats clearly understood that if they had declared their solidarity with flight attendants, they

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would have had to explain why the union didn't call on us to defy the government last December. Postal workers have taken note of the complete failure of the CUPW in our own struggle. The CUPW leadership is determined to stop us engaging in any activity that would hinder the profitability of Canadian capitalism. Our union, like CUPE, is subordinating our working conditions and wages to the corporate profit motive.

Many postal workers have been looking at what the flight attendants did and asking themselves, "Why didn't we defy the government like the flight attendants?" This question is entirely legitimate, but it's important to recognize that the flight attendants' courageous defiance was not enough to prevent their union leaders from stabbing them in the back, just like CUPW is doing to us.

CUPE's "partners" in the Carney government were thrown into a crisis by the workers' defiance, so the bureaucrats threw them a lifeline. A deal was made behind the backs of striking workers. A deal good enough for CUPE to coerce flight attendants back to work, but a deal not good enough for the union to officially endorse. One way or another, flight attendants will suffer a massive real wage cut as a result of the huge bite inflation took from their incomes under their previous 10-year contract. CUPE won't even allow workers to vote on the full proposed contract, only partial sections of it relating to pay.

The union officialdom wants to keep their cushy salaries while flight attendants toil under increasingly worse conditions. To that end, CUPE has turned the vote into a complete farce. The earlier refusal by CUPE for binding arbitration was akin to smoke and mirrors, designed to disorient the workers. If Air Canada workers "vote wrong" by rejecting the proposed contract in the current ballot, the union has already agreed to send all outstanding issues to binding arbitration. No explanation has been given for the anti-democratic procedure of limiting workers to only voting on the wages part of the contract, which suggests that CUPE made important concession on work-rules, pensions, benefits, etc., that they feel incapable of presenting to the workers in an open vote.

Flight attendants and postal workers find ourselves in a political struggle against the government and the union apparatuses. Only a political movement breaking the isolation imposed by the union bureaucracy can succeed in mobilizing broad sections of workers to defend everyone's right to strike and thereby win contracts that reverse decades of concessions which workers can democratically ratify.

The way forward for postal workers, flight attendants, and all other workers who find themselves in miserable working conditions is to build or join rank-and-file committees associated with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). In this way, our isolation can be broken, our strike activity can actually have an impact, and those in power who would crush us under the weight of market forces will have a working-class force to answer to. We can make this happen by building a movement that rejects the profit motive as the guiding principle, that leads a political fight against the government and corporate Canada's effort to sacrifice our jobs and working conditions, in order to pay for rearmament and war, and provide subsidies to enrich the already wealthy oligarchs.

I am making an appeal for flight attendants and postal workers to consciously link our struggles together in defence of all public services, the right to strike, and for worker control over new technologies. UPS workers in Canada, under the discipline of the Teamsters union, are currently negotiating an agreement, and they are an obvious group of workers we should make appeals to. The global industry standard is for flight attendants to perform unpaid ground work, therefore American flight attendants are another obvious group of workers we should make appeals to. These appeals should be made in line with the IWA-RFC's goal of broadening workers' struggles into an industrial and political counteroffensive to defeat government strikebreaking and secure good jobs and working conditions for all.

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