# Air Canada flight attendants reject sellout wage deal in massive rebuke to union bureaucracy, Carney government

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Flight attendants at Air Canada have delivered a stunning rebuke to management, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) bureaucracy, and Mark Carney's Liberal government by decisively voting down the tentative wage agreement that brought an end to their three-day strike last month. The result, announced Saturday, saw a 99.1 percent "No" vote on a turnout of 94.6 percent, with workers trashing an agreement CUPE had trumpeted as "transformational."

As the result of a reactionary agreement CUPE struck with management and the government, the only portion of the proposed four-year contract workers were actually allowed to vote on was that governing wages. It called for a 17 percent pay "increase" over four years—in reality, a real-terms pay cut due to years of wage stagnation under the previous 10-year contract and soaring prices for food and basic necessities.

The vote's outcome underlines the urgent necessity of flight attendants at Air Canada and across North America, as well as workers in every economic sector, establishing their organizational and political independence from the trade union bureaucracy. Rank-and-file committees, controlled by flight attendants, must be built at every workplace and unified into a network of rank-and-file committees to coordinate an industrial and political struggle by the working class to put an end to the prioritizing of corporate profits over workers' rights in the airline industry.

More than 10,500 flight attendants walked off the job August 16 to demand real wage increases and an end to the practice of unpaid labour prior to and after flights which averages out to 35 hours per month per worker. Less than 12 hours after the strike began, Jobs Minister Patty Hajdu intervened on behalf of the big business Liberal government to ban the strike under the draconian provisions of Section 107 of the Canada Labour Code. Underscoring their determination to fight, the flight attendants defied the order, which was based on a cooked-up interpretation of Section 107 allowing Hajdu to unilaterally instruct the unelected Canadian Industrial Relations Board to declare the strike illegal, bypassing Parliament.

The CUPE bureaucracy felt compelled to sanction the workers' decision to defy the government, but they did so the better to stab the workers in the back. During the third day of the strike, the CUPE leadership entered marathon talks with Air Canada management overseen by government-appointed mediator William Kaplan. In the early hours of Tuesday, August 19, CUPE announced an "agreement" with the company, claiming that it put an end to unpaid labour at Air Canada. However, in a powerful indication that the terms of the agreement were a sellout, the union barred the workers from voting on the majority of its provisions.

Moreover, to ensure that the vote of the rank and file was essentially meaningless, CUPE agreed that in the event flight attendants voted down the deal, all outstanding questions in the agreement would be subject to binding arbitration after a token three-day period of mediation.

In the parts of the agreement over which workers were stripped of any say, the union made massive concessions to management. Even though Air Canada indicated prior to the strike that it was willing to pay for the pre-flight work performed by flight attendants at 50 percent of their regular rate of pay, CUPE acceded to a deal that enshrined the 50 percent rate (and nothing for post-flight work). The only change offered up by the union as proof that any gains were made was that management now accepted that the pay rate for pre-flight ground-work would increase incrementally to reach 70 percent of flight attendants' regular wage by the fourth year of the agreement. Given the average wage for flight attendants of $29 per hour, a rate of pay for ground work of 50 percent means the workers will be compensated below the federal minimum wage.

The main reason behind CUPE's rush to sabotage the flight attendants' defiance of the government's strikebreaking order was that the bureaucracy was terrified that the workers' struggle would serve as an example to other workers, triggering a broader mobilization against capitalist austerity that the bureaucracy would struggle to control. The issues over which Air Canada workers are fighting, including the right to strike, low wages and unpaid labour, are issues affecting all workers.

The gang-up against the flight attendants orchestrated by the CUPE leadership, Air Canada executives and government officials provides yet another glaring example of the pro-employer character of Canada's "labour relations" system. So-called "collective bargaining" is a key mechanism for the ruling class to suppress the class struggle by separating each workers' struggle to create the best conditions for forcing through the bosses' demands. The system also serves as the basis for the privileges enjoyed by the union bureaucrats, who have a direct material

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interest in maintaining and intensifying the exploitation of the workers they claim to represent in order to defend their corporatist "partnership" with the bosses and government.

The outcome of the contract vote is a damning indictment of the entire union bureaucracy and its cheerleaders in the pseudo-left organizations, who loudly proclaimed that last month's flight attendants' strike produced a resounding "victory" for the workers. The Canadian Labour Congress, which claims to "represent" the interests of millions of workers, stated breathlessly August 19 that the agreement announced in the dead of night by CUPE proved that "bargaining, not Carney's Section 107, delivers deals." Canada's main union federation asserted that the strikers "have delivered a decisive blow to employers who think they can sidestep fair bargaining by hiding behind Section 107 of the Canada Labour Code." Socialist.ca, the website of the state capitalist International Socialists, claimed that the Air Canada workers had "beat back Carney's anti-union attack."

Rank-and-file flight attendants left no doubt about what they think of such propagandizing for the union bureaucracy with their near-unanimous opposition to the agreement that supposedly achieved their "victory" over Air Canada and the government. Bitter hostility towards the bureaucracy was evident in numerous comments posted by workers on a Facebook page for airline workers following the union's announcement of the vote result.

"This outcome exposes the union's failure at the bargaining table," wrote one worker. "What should have been a historic opportunity for a fair contract and decent working conditions was squandered. Instead, we are left silenced and bound by a deal that doesn't reflect our worth. I've said it before and I'll say it again: everything was in place for us to win real progress. Something happened behind closed doors—and sooner or later, the truth will surface."

Another worker said, "Hey CUPE National, you corrupt collaborators: stop selling out locals and workers and rolling over every time there is an illegal forced arbitration order. You are giving up the right to strike for all of us, and we see you, and you are disgusting."

The Air Canada flight attendants have done everything possible within the official "collective bargaining" framework to express their desire to carry out a genuine struggle for their entirely justified demands. They voted overwhelmingly for strike action and courageously stood up to the Carney government in the face of a foul anti-worker campaign in the media aimed at smearing the strikers as disrupters of air travelers' business and holiday plans. And now, despite the union bureaucrats offering absolutely nothing by way of a strategy for workers to fight for their demands, the flight attendants have voted decisively to reject the wage settlement.

But militancy and justified outrage at the despicable actions of the union leadership alone are inadequate. What the experience of Air Canada workers so clearly demonstrates is that they cannot take a single step forward without breaking the stranglehold of the union bureaucracy over their struggles. They must orient to the building of a mass movement of the working class on an entirely new basis: a program demanding an end to all strikebreaking and the securing of decent-paying, secure jobs for all.

During the Air Canada workers' strike, the *World Socialist Web Site* insisted that it marked a "turning point in the class struggle" due to the strikers' open defiance of the government. On numerous occasions over the preceding year, including in December 2024 when a government strikebreaking order sent 55,000 postal workers back to work without a fight, the union bureaucracy felt able to connive with the government to block resistance from the rank and file. The flight attendants' courageous stand proved that the smothering of workers' opposition to capitalist austerity is becoming increasingly difficult. Moreover, it revealed that every contract struggle by workers is a political fight, pitting their demands against the drive of the ruling class to subordinate all of society's resources to rearmament, imperialist war and the enrichment of the financial oligarchy.

However, we warned that unless workers broke free from the purveyors of nationalism and capitalist austerity in the union bureaucracies, their struggles would inevitably go down to defeat. We insisted,

> The Air Canada strike shows that workers are striving to assert their class interests. To succeed, they must abolish the bureaucratized trade union apparatus and transfer power back to the rank and file, where it belongs.
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> 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 the organizational and political means for this struggle. Through the development of rank-and-file committees, workers can advance demands based on their needs, not corporate profit; counter the sabotage of the bureaucracy; and mobilize their immense social power in coordinated struggles across industries, borders and continents.
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> The development of the IWA-RFC is a crucial element in the fight to arm the growing upsurge of the working class with a socialist-internationalist program—one that must guide the struggle against imperialist war, dictatorship and the destruction of workers' social and democratic rights, and for workers' power.

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