

CUPE imposes arbitration after Air Canada flight attendants' 99% rejection of sellout wage deal

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Last week's agreement by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) to scrap three days of mediation over wages and rush Air Canada flight attendants into binding arbitration is the latest stage in the union bureaucracy's betrayal of a militant struggle that defied the state and threatened to galvanize workers across Canada.

"The union spent nine months bargaining in good faith with the company on wages and saw no evidence that an additional three days of mediation will yield an acceptable result. The union is therefore seeking an expedited process that will put money in our members' pockets and conclude this process as quickly as possible," CUPE's Air Canada component said in a statement, justifying its latest capitulation.

Less than two weeks earlier, over 10,500 flight attendants delivered a resounding rebuke to Air Canada management, the Carney Liberal government, and the union apparatus itself by voting 99.1 percent against a wage deal CUPE had proclaimed as "transformational." With a turnout of nearly 95 percent, the result expressed the overwhelming hostility of the rank and file to an agreement that offered nothing but real-terms pay cuts, the continuation of unpaid labour, and a surrender of basic democratic rights.

The vote exposed in stark relief the fraudulent character of the "collective bargaining" framework and the unions' role as its chief enforcers. Under the terms of CUPE's hastily cut deal with management and the government—worked out behind workers' backs in late-night talks to shut down their defiance of a back-to-work order last month—the only section of the contract that workers were even permitted to vote on was wages.

A proposed 17 percent increase stretched over four years amounted to a pay cut once inflation and years of wage stagnation were factored in. Meanwhile, the union bureaucracy barred flight attendants from voting on the vast majority of concessions it had agreed to behind closed doors. These included the enshrinement of a two-tier system of pay for ground duties, with pre-flight work paid at just 50 percent of regular rates and post-flight work left entirely unpaid.

Air Canada had already indicated it was prepared to make concessions to pay at the 50 percent rate. CUPE signed off on this and tried to present a minor tweak—raising it incrementally to 70 percent by year four—as a breakthrough. In reality, this means ground work will continue to be paid at wages below the federal minimum wage, leaving flight attendants compensated for only a fraction of the average 35 hours of unpaid labour they are compelled to perform each month.

The way in which the "vote" was structured underscored the cynicism of the operation. CUPE bound workers in advance by stipulating that if they rejected the wage terms, the remainder of the deal would be kicked to mediation and then to binding arbitration, guaranteeing that workers would never be permitted to alter the outcome. The flight attendants'

defiant rejection of the deal therefore represented not only opposition to management's dictates but also an unmistakable repudiation of the bureaucracy's attempt to smother their struggle.

The context of this fight reveals why CUPE moved with such haste to strangle it. On August 16, the flight attendants launched their strike after voting overwhelmingly for job action to secure wage increases and the end of unpaid labour. Less than 12 hours later, Jobs Minister Patty Hajdu, wielding the draconian powers of Section 107 of the Canada Labour Code as reinterpreted by the Liberals over the last two years to arrogate new authoritarian strikebreaking powers, banned the strike. The order was rammed through by way of a cooked-up ruling from the Canadian Industrial Relations Board—composed of unelected representatives of big business, the unions and government—which Hajdu instructed to declare the strike illegal without even a parliamentary vote.

Underscoring their determination, flight attendants openly defied the order and continued their walkout. CUPE sanctioned this defiance not to secure the workers' just demands and beat back the state assault on the right to strike, but only so as to keep control long enough to corral workers back on the job. Within hours of blustering about accepting jail time and significant fines to keep the strike going, the bureaucracy entered an overnight bargaining session with Air Canada management under government mediator William Kaplan, and by the early morning of August 19, CUPE announced its rotten deal.

The union bureaucracy's overriding fear was that the flight attendants' courageous defiance of Carney's strikebreaking operation would inspire other sections of the working class. Inflation, wage suppression, and the systematic assault on the right to strike are burning issues for workers in every sector, from education to healthcare to the auto industry. An indefinite illegal strike carried through in defiance of the government threatened to break open the carefully managed system of corporatist "labour relations" that has for decades kept class struggle under tight bureaucratic control and destabilize the recently elected minority Carney Liberal government before it even presented a budget. CUPE intervened, not as a fighting organization for workers, but as a political police force acting on behalf of the capitalist state to shut it down.

An anti-worker conspiracy

The other unions' silence reveals the scale of the conspiracy. The Canadian Labour Congress rushed to declare that CUPE's midnight deal had proven "bargaining, not Carney's Section 107, delivers deals." The Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW), itself facing a contract battle

under threat of arbitration, said nothing until after everything was safely wrapped up. This gang-up was not an accident but the conscious policy of the entire bureaucracy, whose privileges rest on their alliance with the corporations and the government. For them, the defence of “Team Canada”—the tripartite partnership binding big business, government, and unions together—takes precedence over defending workers’ wages, jobs, and rights.

Predictably, the pseudo-left has responded to the Air Canada flight attendants’ defiance not by exposing the treachery of CUPE but by doing everything possible to bolster illusions in the very bureaucracy that sold out the strike. *Spring Magazine* rushed out a series of articles hailing the tentative agreement as proof that “workers will decide when the strike ends, not the government,” wilfully obscuring the fact that CUPE had already enforced Carney’s back-to-work order and locked workers into a framework designed to strangle their struggle.

Communist Revolution/Marxist.ca and Socialist Action likewise praised the union leadership for supposedly resisting state repression, presenting CUPE and the broader bureaucracy as reluctant fighters who needed only to be pressured into action. In reality, it was the rank-and-file workers’ upsurge of militancy, and their determination to continue the strike illegally, if necessary, that forced CUPE even to feign opposition to their Liberal allies. Once the bureaucracy judged the danger contained, it established a mechanism to rapidly lock flight attendants into mediation and then arbitration, ensuring the defeat of the rank-and-file’s defiant stand.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has long insisted that the pseudo-left serves as an adjunct of the trade union bureaucracy, who paint these thoroughly integrated agents of the capitalist state as oppositional in order to block workers from breaking free of their grip. By portraying the union officials as flawed allies rather than conscious enforcers of the bosses’ and government’s dictates, groups like Labor Notes and *Jacobin*, aligned with the Democratic Socialists of America faction of the US Democratic Party and the New Democratic Party in Canada, deliberately smother the class struggle in pursuit of their own privileges, whether tied to academia, NGO funding, or the union apparatus itself.

This is not simply a matter of mistaken strategy but a political function: to chloroform workers at the very moment when they begin to recognize that their most determined enemies are not only the corporate elite and the state but also the bureaucratic apparatus that polices the working class on their behalf. Only by breaking through this wall of political deception can workers develop their own independent organizations and the necessary revolutionary socialist perspective, free from the chokehold of the union bureaucracy and its pseudo-left defenders.

Rank-and-file flight attendants, however, saw through the propaganda. Comments posted on workers’ forums after the vote brimmed with anger toward CUPE, condemning its leadership as corrupt collaborators who had squandered a “historic opportunity” and bound workers to a deal that failed to reflect their worth. “Everything was in place for us to win real progress,” one wrote. “Something happened behind closed doors—and sooner or later, the truth will surface.” Another declared bluntly: “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 betrayal of the Air Canada strike finds a clear parallel in the experience of Ontario education support workers in 2022. Then, 55,000 low-paid school employees, organized in CUPE’s Ontario School Board Council of Unions (OSBCU), launched a strike in open defiance of Tory Premier Doug Ford’s Bill 28, which pre-emptively outlawed their job action and invoked the “notwithstanding clause” to override constitutional rights.

The education support workers’ defiance electrified workers across the

province, sparked mass demonstrations, and raised the prospect of a general strike as workers in the tens of thousands spontaneously rallied in solidarity. But it was precisely at this point, when the Ford government was on the ropes, that OSBCU President Laura Walton and CUPE National intervened to shut the struggle down. In behind-the-scenes talks with Ford that also involved the Canadian Labour Congress, Unifor, and other national union leaders, a deal was concocted to sabotage the workers’ courageous struggle without meeting any of their demands. Without a vote or even a tentative agreement, Walton ordered workers back on the job after Ford promised to repeal Bill 28, throwing away the chance to win inflation-busting raises and secure badly needed resources for public education. While the union leaderships hailed the shutdown of the strike as a great “victory” because Ford withdrew the strike ban law, the workers were left less than a month later with a rotten concessions-filled contract that CUPE proceeded to ram down their throats. The bureaucracy rewarded Walton for this betrayal by elevating her to the presidency of the Ontario Federation of Labour.

The need for rank-and-file committees

The lesson for flight attendants, as for education workers, is unmistakable: the union apparatus is not a vehicle for advancing workers’ struggles but an instrument for suppressing them. In both cases, the determination of the rank and file brought governments to the brink of crisis, only to be rescued by the bureaucracy, whose privileges and political alliances depend on smothering the working class’s social power.

The outcome of the confrontation at Air Canada has once again confirmed in the starkest terms that militancy alone is not enough. The courage of the flight attendants in defying the government and voting down the deal proved that workers are ready to fight. But it also proved that so long as the bureaucracy retains control, such defiance will be smothered. CUPE has now abandoned mediation altogether and handed the contract over to arbitration, ensuring that workers will be bound to management’s terms without any pretense of a democratic say.

The experience of the Air Canada flight attendants is thus a damning indictment of the entire system of “collective bargaining” and of the union apparatus that administers it. This framework does not empower workers; it separates and isolates their struggles in order to ram through the employers’ demands. It provides the material basis for the privileges of the bureaucrats, whose perks and salaries depend on preserving their corporatist partnerships with business and government. And it is defended by the pseudo-left, which peddles illusions in this system to block workers from making a political and organizational break from it.

The lessons for workers in Canada and internationally are clear. The right to strike, the fight for living wages, and the defence of democratic rights cannot be secured through CUPE, CUPW, Unifor, or any of the nationalist and pro-capitalist unions. They must be waged through the building of rank-and-file committees, controlled directly by workers, linked across industries and borders, and armed with a political program that rejects the subordination of human need to corporate profit.

The courageous stand taken by flight attendants marked a turning point. It demonstrated that the smothering of worker resistance by the bureaucracy is becoming ever more difficult. But it also showed that victories can only be secured if workers take their struggles into their own hands, consciously break from the union–NDP–Liberal alliance, and link their fight to the building of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees and the Socialist Equality Party (Canada). Only through such a movement, grounded in a socialist and internationalist program, can the immense power of the working class be mobilized to

defeat austerity, defend democratic rights, and reorganize society on the basis of social need.



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