Over 4,000 WestJet flight attendants on strike across Canada against unpaid labour

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Some 4,285 WestJet flight attendants walked off the job early Sunday morning after nearly eleven months of negotiations failed to produce either a contract or a tentative agreement. Members of Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 8125, the cabin crew are striking against unpaid ground duties, inadequate compensation and punishing schedules.

WestJet—Canada's second largest air carrier—cancelled 309 flights through Sunday night, as it shut down its mainline Boeing 737 and 787 operations during one of the summer's busiest travel weekends.

The central issue in the dispute is the unpaid pre- and post-flight labour that flight attendants perform. Cabin crew report before departure, conduct safety checks, assist during boarding, manage delays and remain responsible for passengers during deplaning. Yet they receive no direct wages for this work. What "compensation" they get is through a rigged "credit hour" system that bundles flight time, ground duties and delays into a single calculation, with time spent performing work pre- and post-flight given a far-lower value.

Summing up the sentiments of the rank and file against a system that robs them on average of $1,100 per month and particularly penalizes low-paid, low-seniority attendants, the strikers' picket signs declare: "Unpaid labour won't fly."

WestJet has resisted workers' demand for full wages for all the labour they perform, insisting that unpaid pre- and post-flight work is the norm across the industry in North America.

According to news reports, WestJet made a new offer, shortly before the strike began, one that it claims will provide "hourly wages" for all pre- and post-flight work. However, this would be at a substantially lower wage-rate. Nor does the airline's "double-digit" four-year wage offer compensate for the massive burst of inflation since 2021, when CUPE negotiated a concessionary, 4-year 10-month agreement amid the pandemic.

"We tried until the very last minute to get a fair deal that recognizes the value of the work cabin crews do," said CUPE 8125 President Alia Hussain. "WestJet's offer did not go far enough."

Hussain said workers are prepared to resume negotiations and appealed to the federal Liberal government not to intervene to force an end to the strike. "Unpaid work is a big piece of our priorities, but we are bargaining a comprehensive contract," she said.

Corporate Canada is already demanding that the Liberal government, led by the former blue-chip executive and central bank governor Mark Carney, break the strike. The Canadian Chamber of Commerce has declared that "every hour matters" and is urging Ottawa to use "every tool at its disposal" to restore air service.

The most immediate weapon available to Jobs Minister Patty Hajdu is Section 107 of the Canada Labour Code. The Trudeau and Carney Liberal governments have "reinterpreted" this hitherto obscure provision to transform it into a mechanism for outlawing strikes and imposing binding arbitration through the unelected Canada Industrial Relations Board (CIRB). They have thereby dispensed with even the democratic fig leaf of a parliamentary vote on back-to-work legislation.

Since 2023, Ottawa has invoked Section 107 ten times, nine of them to halt or suspend strikes and lockouts or impose binding arbitration. Workers at Air Canada, Canada Post, major ports and the country's two principal railways have been targeted, as were WestJet mechanics.

Hajdu has refused to rule out using Section 107 and the CIRB to illegalize the flight attendants' strike, with her office merely saying the government prefers a "negotiated settlement." The Liberal government, it need be added, is currently considering making changes to the labour code to expand the designation of "essential workers"—legally prohibited from striking—to private transport and telecommunications workers, and otherwise limit worker job-action.

York University labour expert Steven Tufts told CBC News that he expects government intervention if the strike lasts more than a day or two. He connected Ottawa's concern with "labour stability" with its drive to attract global investment. This includes Carney's efforts to make publicly owned airport infrastructure attractive to private investors. "If you're trying to get top dollar for that kind of infrastructure sale … you have to have labour discipline," Tufts said. "The government in this sector is always in the room."

WestJet workers must draw the sharpest lessons from last year's Air Canada strike, when flight attendants defied a government back-to-work order, only to have the CUPE union apparatus shut down their strike at the very point that it was galvanizing mass support and the big business Liberal government had been pushed onto the back foot. Above all, the experience demonstrates the urgency of striking WestJet cabin crew establishing democratically controlled organizations of struggle—rank-and-file strike committees—so that they can countermand the inevitable efforts of the CUPE bureaucracy to sabotage their fight.

On August 16, 2025, the more than 10,500 Air Canada flight attendants walked out over unpaid labour and falling real wages—the very same issues the WestJet workers are striking over today—launching their first national strike in nearly four decades.

Less than twelve hours after the strike began, Hajdu invoked Section 107. But workers defied the CIRB's back-to-work order, exposing the fragility of the government's strikebreaking operation.

CUPE officials responded with militant-sounding speeches while entering closed-door negotiations supervised by a government-appointed mediator. Some 36 hours after the back-to-work order was to take effect, the CUPE leadership ordered the flight attendants to return to work without any vote or even any details of the agreement.

It soon emerged that the union bureaucracy's claims of "victory" and "ending" unpaid work were a total fraud. Under the terms of the CUPE negotiated agreement, pre-flight duties were initially compensated at just 50 percent of the regular wage, while post-flight work remains unpaid.

Moreover, CUPE struck a deal with Air Canada and the government under which the flight attendants were denied the right to vote on the new compensation system for pre- and post-flight work. The only portion of the contract that they were allowed to vote on—the schedule of wage increases—the flight attendants rejected by an overwhelming 99.1 percent.

But again, CUPE had tied their hands. Effectively enforcing the government's strike ban, the union had renounced workers right to strike and agreed that the wages agreement would be sent to binding arbitration in the event the flight attendants rejected it.

This betrayal cannot be separated from CUPE's integration into the "Team Canada" nationalist alliance with the Carney government. CUPE officials, the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) and the New Democratic Party have rallied behind Carney in the name of "defending Canada" against Donald Trump's trade war and annexation threats. Nationalism is the political glue binding the union bureaucracy to the capitalist state and ensures it will enforce government dictates, regardless of union officials' militant posturing.

During the Air Canada strike, the CLC convened an "emergency" meeting of top union bureaucrats to contain the confrontation and shield the government from a wider working class movement. It claimed Carney had been "elected to fight against Trump" and to "protect our jobs and our communities," presenting trade war, austerity and rearmament as a defence of workers.

CUPE's appeal for "free collective bargaining" at WestJet must be understood within this framework. By asking Ottawa to allow negotiations to proceed, the bureaucracy is negotiating the terms of its continued role as an enforcer of labour discipline. It accepts the pro-business labour code, the CIRB and the state-regulated bargaining system repeatedly used to suppress strikes because it is the source of its privileges.

The same issues confront 300 CPKC signal and communications workers represented by the IBEW, who went on strike May 31 over wages, expenses and punishing on-call schedules. CPKC has maintained operations through contractors, exploiting loopholes in federal anti-scab provisions.

These struggles unfold as Carney commits Canada to spending 5 percent of gross domestic product on the military and related "security" infrastructure by 2035, driving annual expenditures toward roughly $150 billion. Tens of billions must be extracted from healthcare, education, public services and workers' living standards to finance Canadian imperialism's rearmament.

WestJet flight attendants must establish rank-and-file committees independent of the CUPE apparatus in order to take control of the strike out of the hands of the bureaucracy, ensure democratic oversight of every proposed agreement and prepare defiance of any government strikebreaking order. They should appeal to Air Canada workers, pilots, mechanics, airport workers, postal workers and railway workers, including the CPKC strikers, for support in defending the right to strike and workers' living standards.

This appeal must extend to flight attendants and airline workers in the United States, Mexico and internationally. Unpaid labour is an industry-wide issue enforced by transnational airlines and backed by governments across borders. Workers can defeat this coordinated offensive only through the international unity of the working class.

CUPE's record points toward an impending sellout, either through capitulation to Section 107 or the imposition of a concessions-filled agreement after a brief period of militant posturing. Rank-and-file organization and a socialist-internationalist political strategy are necessary to defeat that betrayal and mobilize the working class against the Carney government's program of austerity, war and attacks on democratic rights.