Canada’s Liberal government prevails on CUPE to short-circuit militant strike of 4,400 WestJet flight attendants

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The strike by some 4,400 flight attendants against WestJet—Canada’s second largest airline—was short-circuited by the union bureaucracy after little more than a day. The flight attendants walked off the job Sunday to demand an end to unpaid duties while planes are on the ground, inadequate compensation and punishing scheduling.

Early Monday morning, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) announced it had reached a tentative agreement with WestJet and was ordering the flight attendants to immediately return to work.

As of Wednesday afternoon, more than two days later, CUPE continues to refuse to provide the WestJet flight attendants with key details of the tentative agreement.

However, Alia Hussain, the president of the CUPE local that represents the WestJet workers (Local 8125) effectively conceded that the workers’ demands are far from having been met. Hussain said Monday the agreement represents “meaningful progress.”

Meanwhile, Jobs Minister Patty Hajdu has boasted that the federal Liberal government played a major role in forcing a quick end to the strike. In a social media post “welcoming” the agreement, Hajdu noted that she and labour department officials had met with WestJet and CUPE representatives throughout the negotiations, including in separate meetings, and had pushed for the deal that ended the strike. In other words, Mark Carney’s Liberals—who are pursuing a savage class war agenda of huge increases to military spending, tax cuts and handouts to the super-rich and vicious austerity and attacks on worker rights—have their hands all over the proposed contract.

During the brief strike and in the days preceding it, Hajdu repeatedly used the same weasel words the Liberal government has used in discussing every strike in recent years that it subsequently illegalized. She claimed to have a preference for a “negotiated settlement” and that “the best deals are at the bargaining table.”

The CUPE bureaucracy, which in August 2025 was briefly compelled to sanction Air Canada flight attendants’ defiance of a government back-to-work order, was acutely aware of the imminent threat of government intervention to break the WestJet strike. It decided to do the government’s dirty work and impose a sellout contract.

CUPE’s goal was to avoid a government back-to-work order, which would have led to demands for defiance that could have escaped the bureaucracy’s control. If the WestJet workers had followed the example of Air Canada flight attendants last August, their defiance could have sparked a working class challenge to the Carney Liberal government, with which it and the entire union top brass are closely allied.

Underscoring that for the CUPE bureaucracy, the top priority was securing the privileges of CUPE officials rather than the demands of the flight attendants, Hussain said of the tentative agreement, “Most importantly, this agreement was achieved through collective bargaining at the negotiating table.”

WestJet and unpaid work

Key to the contract discussions were demands for the redress of WestJet’s retrograde “credit hours” payment system that robs cabin crew of an estimated $1,100 per month. At WestJet, cabin crew do not receive hourly wages for the hours they spend assisting passengers with boarding, deplaning and pre-flight briefings, not to mention the time spent sitting on the tarmac during lengthy delays.

A recent study by the union shows flight attendants on average put in 35 unpaid hours a month performing such duties. The study, based on typical schedules over several months, showed that WestJet flight attendants would earn less than the federal minimum wage of $18.15 per hour if their time spent on the ground was calculated as part of their shifts.

At a Monday afternoon press conference lasting less than five minutes and convened at the side of a busy airport roadway in Calgary, Hussain announced that the tentative contract offer would be presented to the membership over the next 30 days in a slideshow that would precede the ratification meetings.

Hussain stated in very general terms that the deal “evolves the flight credit system by recognizing more of the work cabin crew are required to perform.” In other words, it perpetuates unpaid work, just as the agreement ultimately imposed on Air Canada flight attendants did. In the brief question and answer period at her press conference, she let the cat out of the bag as regards to the union bureaucracy’s capitulation to the threat of a government strike ban. CUPE, said Hussain, was ending the strike and expects the membership to ratify the tentative agreement “due to the circumstances we were facing.”

The “circumstances”—which she refused to spell out—were that the workers confronted the imminent threat of government intervention to illegalize their powerful strike using a dubious “re-interpretation” of the notorious Section 107 of the Canada Labour Code. Cooked up by the past two Liberal governments, it enables Ottawa to bypass even a cursory parliamentary back-to-work vote and instruct the unelected Canadian Industrial Relations Board (CIRB) to declare a strike illegal and impose binding arbitration. That maneuver, now deployed ten times over the past 3 years, has become the “ace-in-the-hole” for both the federal government and their corporate paymasters in key sectors of the economy. The union decided under these conditions to save Hajdu the trouble and play the role of strikebreaker-in-chief.

Not only is this a flagrant betrayal of the WestJet flight attendants. It will embolden the Carney government, which under its current labor code review is planning to introduce a host of new restrictions on workers’ legal right to strike.

There is an element of truth in Hussain’s remark that the “collective bargaining” system had secured a “victory.” After all, the state-designed, pro-employer collective bargaining system is the means by which privileged representatives in the union bureaucracy organize their cooperation with corporate bosses and the state to jointly manage the ruthless exploitation of the working class. These union leaders are never concerned with the vicious attacks on wages and working conditions demanded by the ruling class in principle but merely want to ensure their “seat at the table” in enforcing them.

Two weeks before the strike deadline, Hajdu appointed Peter Simpson, the Director-General of the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service, as a special mediator to oversee the WestJet bargaining process. Simpson’s reputation surely preceded him. He has acted as the government’s spearhead at virtually every major strike in the country over the past several years. He has “assisted” strike-bound or strike-threatened corporations to force company-friendly contracts at the two national Canadian railways, on the Pacific docks, at Canada Post and last year during the Air Canada flight attendants’ strike.

Lessons of CUPE’s betrayal of the 2025 Air Canada strike

Last year’s sellout contract at Air Canada is particularly instructive for the WestJet flight attendants, who should now organize to seize control of their contract struggle from the CUPE apparatus through the building of rank-and-file committees.

In August 2025, the flight attendants launched a strike after voting overwhelmingly for job action to secure wage increases and the end of unpaid labour. The strike drew deep sympathy from the Canadian population and completely grounded the airline. Less than 12 hours later, Hajdu, wielding the anti-constitutional powers of Section 107 of the Canada Labour Code, ordered the CIRB to ban the strike.

The flight attendants openly defied the order and continued their walkout. CUPE briefly 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. The CUPE bureaucracy then entered a snap overnight bargaining session with management under government mediation and by the early morning the union announced its rotten deal.

The agreement was “binding” on the membership. They were not allowed to vote on the key parts of the contract. On the sections they were allowed to vote on, they rejected the deal by a whopping 99 percent. The “settlement” initially provided for only a 50 percent pay scale for unpaid pre-flight work. There was no award for unpaid post-flight work. It is this deal that the CUPE bargaining team at WestJet has sought to emulate.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote at the time, “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 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.”

Underlying the current attacks on workers living standards is a systemic crisis of capitalism, which is driving the Canadian ruling class and its imperialist rivals to fight for markets, resources and profits by intensifying worker-exploitation and waging war. It is enough to note that the Carney government’s much-touted achievement of the old NATO target of spending 2 percent of GDP on the military amounts to a mere 40 percent of the 5 percent it has committed to spend on war in just nine years’ time. The additional tens of billions of dollars needed every single year to reach this target must be extracted from healthcare, education and other public services and social supports. Knowing full well that such policies will trigger mass opposition, the ruling class wants to rob workers of any legal right to strike or resist and create new mechanisms to impose government-dictated austerity.

It is precisely to this groundswell of popular opposition that all workers must turn. The fight for decent wages and conditions in all economic sectors must be linked up with the struggle against rearmament, imperialist war and the growth of authoritarian forms of rule, including attacks on the right to strike. This demands the construction of new organizations of class struggle—rank-and-file committees—to break the grip of the union bureaucracy and mobilize the industrial and political power of the working class against capitalist austerity and war.