

Carney government announces plans to privatize major Canadian airports

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Are you an aviation industry worker or expert? Contact the Aviation Workers Rank-and-File Committee at aviationworkersrfc@gmail.com to support the independent workers inquiry into the death of ramp agent Oscar Robayo with your testimony.

At the Canada Investment Summit held in Toronto last month, Prime Minister Mark Carney unveiled plans to open up Canada's four largest airports to private investors. The government's goal is to free up "the capital that is tied up in those airports" so it can be "redeployed potentially in other ventures that will grow our economy."

Canadian airports were semi-privatized in the 1990s, when the Chretien/Martin Liberal government handed operations over to nominally non-profit airport authorities. These airport authorities currently pay rent to the federal government, which remains the landowner, and must reinvest surpluses in the airport's operations.

However, these authorities have already gone a long way to opening up airport services to ruthless competition through the proliferation of subcontracting. The latest announcements are therefore the completion rather than the beginning of a systematic government-spearheaded drive to deregulate air travel. It has already produced a disastrous deterioration in working conditions for aviation industry workers, including increasingly dangerous workplaces, precarious jobs, and low wages.

Less than a month before Carney's announcement, ramp agent Oscar Robayo was crushed to death by the landing gear of a passenger jet while performing a routine pushback operation at Montreal Trudeau International Airport. His death was the result of the systematic disregard for basic safety procedures practiced by French-based multinational Samsic, a subcontractor for ground services that has expanded rapidly in North America due to government deregulation.

The privatization of Canada's four main airports in Montreal, Toronto, Calgary, and Vancouver promises to be a massive windfall for the representatives of international finance capital who were gathered in Toronto when Carney made his announcement. Alongside airport privatization, the Carney government has presented a "mega" deduction on new business investment worth \$36 billion over five years that will cut the marginal effective tax rate for corporations to 6.4 percent, half of what it is in the United States. Just days after the summit, the Liberal government tabled Bill C-39, which gives it expanded powers to criminalize strikes without so much as a vote in the house of Commons.

Extensive evidence from other countries demonstrates that airport privatization comes with a drastic deterioration in working conditions and affordability for the travelling public. A report published by the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), "Public Runways, Private Profit," evaluated similar projects in New Zealand, Portugal, the US, the UK, and Australia. It stressed that the pressure to boost profits would result in staff reductions, the undermining of working conditions, and more dangerous airport operations.

The study found that within 10 years of privatization, per passenger revenues had ballooned by more than 60 percent at Perth Airport in

Australia. In Sydney, Australia, private operators eliminated 40 percent of the workforce as soon as post-sale government job protections had expired. AT San Juan Airport in Puerto Rico, privatization produced chronic shortages in firefighting staff, resulting in greater workloads and reduced capacity to respond to emergencies.

The CLC also referred to the practice of "contract flipping" that already exists at Canadian airports, under which subcontractors can underbid current providers by operating with lower labour costs. This competition would accelerate with fully privatized airports, since the authorities would have a direct incentive to cut costs in order to boost investor returns. A provision in Bill C-39 would allow union bargaining rights to be maintained following a contract flip, principally because the government knows that the union bureaucracies are partners in the destruction of working conditions and the imposition of other concessions.

The report estimated that investors will need 15–20 percent more revenue from airports to remain "competitive," which they will seek to achieve through increased exploitation and the gutting of safety standards. Airports are effectively localized monopolies, so extracting the gains will be achieved by significantly hiking landing fees for airlines, dramatically increasing user costs (parking, retail, passenger facility fees, luggage premiums, etc.), and aggressively cutting services and staff. These attacks will put both workers and passengers at greater risk.

Having collected this damning evidence, all that the CLC has mustered is a polite request for the former central banker Carney to "reconsider" his privatization move. The CLC and its member unions, together with Unifor, are bitterly hostile to any mobilization of aviation industry workers against the savage onslaught on their jobs and conditions carried out by the Liberals on behalf of the financial oligarchy.

The union bureaucracies are close allies of Carney and the Liberals in "Team Canada" because they support the ruling elite's class-war agenda of imperialist war abroad and austerity for workers at home. They work to corral workers behind this program by promoting foul Canadian nationalism to persuade them that workers and their bosses share the same interests at a time when the ruling elite is waging a brutal class war on workers' rights and conditions.

In a joint statement by Unifor President Lana Payne and the Canadian Union of Public Employees' Mark Hancock, the pair complained that the decision by Carney to privatize airports "does not square with the federal government's stated goal of building a stronger, more resilient, sovereign Canadian economy."

The trade union bureaucracies have been complicit in the decades-long deregulation of the air travel industry in Canada and the US by blocking worker opposition, and collaborating with governments and big business. In the US, when President Reagan summarily fired 11,000 PATCO air traffic controllers, the AFL/CIO intervened to isolate the air traffic controllers and prevent broader sections of the working class from coming to their defence.

AFL/CIO President Lane Kirkland summed this up in a September 1981

comment, in which he said, “I have never gotten as much mail on any issue in my life...about 90 percent are pro-controllers and about 50 percent of those denounce me for not calling a general strike.” No other union came to the aid of the controllers, either by expanding the strike or respecting picket lines. The defeat of the air traffic controllers set into motion years of union-busting throughout industry and the transformation of the union bureaucracies into partners of the state and corporations who worked tirelessly to ram concessions down workers’ throats.

In Canada, Air Canada was privatized by the Tory government under Prime Minister Brian Mulroney in 1988. After the semi-privatization of airports, Canada’s air traffic control system was fully privatized in 1996. The semi-privatization of airports by the Liberals created conditions for subcontracting to flourish, including the process of “contract flipping” that the CLC hypocritically denounced in its report.

The Dryden Report, published by the federal government after investigations into the 1989 Air Ontario Flight 1363 crash that left 24 people dead, blamed “economic deregulation and deficit reduction.” At the time, the pilots union, the Canadian Airline Pilots Association (CALPA) warned that capital would “trade as closely to the marginal line of safety as the enforcement agency will permit,” but these warnings were subsequently ignored in favour of reckless cost-cutting in pursuit of profit.

The 2000s saw the implementation of so-called “Safety Management Systems” for airlines, with self-regulation replacing government oversight. This further step in the deregulation of air travel was finalized in 2008 with Bill C-7, which mandated secrecy of safety reporting. The dangers of these practices was exemplified in the recent WWSW interview with Kevin Gauthier, an Air Canada pilot who was forced out of his job after filing a safety report about the risks of violating safety procedures during aircraft arrivals.

Throughout this period, the unions worked through their political alliance with the Liberals and new Democrats to suppress working-class opposition to cost-cutting, deregulation, and the gutting of worker rights. In the aviation industry, this included the sabotage of a 2011 strike by Air Canada customer service agents, who were sent back to work by the Canadian Union of Public Employees after the Harper Conservative government vowed to impose back-to-work legislation.

The 2025 strike by Air Canada flight attendants, during which the 10,000-strong workforce defied an anti-democratic strike ban imposed by the Liberal government through a “reinterpretation” of section 107 of the Canada Labour Code, was strangled just hours later by a backroom agreement reached by CUPE in the dead of night with the government. The deal blocked workers from voting on the core of the agreement, which retained the practice of paying flight attendants nothing for work they perform on the ground before departure and after arrival.

The union bureaucracies are also complicit in the sustained undermining of working conditions for ground services via subcontracting and contract flipping. They touted the Liberal government’s claim in 2021 to be reforming section 47.3 of the Canada Labour Code to ensure that subcontractors had to pay at least the same wages to workers following a contract flip as they received from the previous provider. In reality, this was a ruse.

The government intentionally avoided including seniority rights as part of the reform, allowing contractors to simply hire new workers at a lower rate compared to what more experienced staff had earned, or change job titles and responsibilities to avoid wage protections.

The most glaring example of the consequences of this reform were at Montreal Trudeau International Airport, where the multinational Samsic took over ground handling services in 2023 after a contract flip, resulting in a disastrous decline in safety standards.

The International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM) initially denounced the contract flip as “devastating,” but by November 2024 it signed a collective agreement with Samsic that

excluded workers from union membership for the first three months of their employment. In August 2025, the IAM organized a “meet and greet” to laud its close working relationship with Samsic management after the company successfully took over the Montreal operations of one of its rivals, TSAS. When Oscar Robayo died in August, the IAM released a brief 120-word statement and labelled the incident a “tragic accident.”

The result of the sweeping deregulation enforced by the government and suppression of working-class opposition by the union bureaucracies is that air transport has the highest lost-time injury frequency rate of all 16 federally regulated sectors. In 2024, there were 21.41 injuries per million hours worked, an increase from 15.4 per million hours in 2019. 4,793 disabling injuries and 9 deaths were recorded in 2024 alone.

The Carney government’s privatization of airports and massive austerity program will make these conditions even worse. To fund Canada’s massive rearmament program, which aims to make Canadian imperialism ready to wage world war III by increasing military spending to 5 percent of the GDP, the Liberals are taking the axe to other areas of government spending.

The Liberals’ Comprehensive Expenditure Review cuts 15 percent from operational budgets, concentrated in regulatory and service departments—including Transport, which regulates air safety. The same government privatizing the airports is gutting the very department that nominally regulates them.

Workers across the aviation industry and throughout the population can only oppose airport privatization and the undermining of their working conditions by mobilizing their strength independently of the pro-capitalist trade union bureaucracies. The recent establishment of the Aviation Workers Rank-and-File Committee (AWRFC) marks an important step forward in this fight, because it fights for new organizations of class struggle controlled by workers themselves.

The Committee is part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees in recognition of the global character of the struggle faced by aviation workers, who confront the same onslaught by globally operating corporations and their supporters in government in every country.

Rejecting the exploitation of critical infrastructure like airports for private profit and the corporate domination of the airline industry means taking up the fight for democratic workers’ control over the workplace and a workers’ government so that air travel and its associated industries can be run as public utilities for the benefit of all.

As part of this struggle, the AWRFC has launched an independent workers’ inquiry into the death of Oscar Robayo. Organized by workers themselves, the inquiry is taking testimony from ground staff, pilots, cabin crew, customer service agents, and other aviation workers with experience of the consequences of deregulation and the subordination of workplace safety to corporate profit. It is also appealing to air travel experts to come forward with information about safety violations and the risks facing workers in this industry driven by cut-throat global competition.

The inquiry will show the culpability of corporate bosses, governments, and their partners in the union bureaucracies in creating the life-threatening conditions workers confront, and advance measures that aviation workers must fight to implement to ensure workplace safety.

To contact the inquiry, email aviationworkersrfc@gmail.com or fill out the form below.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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