

Canada's trade unions work to suppress opposition to Liberal government's attack on right to strike

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The Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) has launched a toothless campaign to ostensibly “fight” the big business Liberal government’s plan to significantly alter the Canada Labour Code to grant it expanded powers to ban strikes. Bill C-39, an omnibus bill introduced in the House of Commons September 21, also includes a number of other anti-worker and environmentally destructive legislative revisions that favour corporate investment and deregulation schemes.

The legislation “normalizes” newly-assumed, authoritarian government powers to criminalize strike activity in key sectors of the economy and impose worker-contracts through binding arbitration, using a concocted “reinterpretation” of Section 107 of the Canada Labour Code, bypassing the need for parliamentary consent.

Over the past three years, successive Liberal governments have repeatedly invoked Section 107 to end strikes by dockers, rail workers, airline workers, and Canada Post workers among others. Bill C-39 would codify these powers, which have to date been wielded largely on an ad hoc basis by the labour minister. It also contains a wide range of regulatory changes designed to draw out the bargaining process and give government more opportunities to intervene and delay or block strikes.

The Liberal government's class war on workers

Prime Minister Mark Carney is determined to escalate the assault on workers’ rights, wages, public services and working conditions to pay for the enrichment of the wealthy and Canada’s massive rearmament program. Bill C-39 was tabled just a week after Carney hosted representatives of international finance capital for the first Canada Investment Summit, where among other things he announced huge tax cuts for big business.

Carney’s government has also committed to spending 5 percent of GDP on war and related industries by 2035. Imposing this unpopular agenda on the working class under conditions in which it is entering into ever broader struggles demands ruthless state repression, including the stamping out of the right to strike.

The “Building Canada Strong Act” has already passed the required “second reading” in parliament and is now in the committee stage before coming to a final vote in the House of Commons. The legislation is also supported by the right-wing federal Conservative Party of opposition leader Pierre Poilievre and Green Party leader Elizabeth May. Alongside Ontario Conservative Premier Doug Ford, Canada’s two social democratic NDP provincial premiers—David Eby in British Columbia, who will soon leave office after losing last week’s provincial election,

and Wab Kinew in Manitoba—also endorsed significant portions of the bill, especially the parts concerning the deregulation of approval processes for major projects.

The federal bill is a harbinger for similar anti-strike steps that would be taken by all political parties at the provincial level in the wake of the federal bill’s passage. Only last month, NDP Premier Kinew illegalized a strike by Manitoba blood lab workers just hours after it had begun.

Ontario Premier Ford already gained additional anti-democratic notoriety in 2022 after he moved to preemptively suppress a threatened strike by education workers by invoking the “notwithstanding clause,” a provision allowing governments to pass legislation that violates rights ostensibly guaranteed in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

The federal Liberals’ assault on the right to strike has already produced copy-cat moves at the provincial level. Quebec’s Coalition Avenir Quebec government drew direct inspiration from the Trudeau Liberals’ repeated banning of strikes when it implemented Bill 89. It significantly expands the definition of “essential services” in order to block workers’ job actions, and grants the labour minister sweeping powers to end strikes deemed contrary to the “public interest” and impose binding arbitration to settle contract disputes.

CLC determined to suppress class struggle for “Team Canada”

In the face of this all-out onslaught on the rights and living standards of the working class, the CLC is focused on smothering popular opposition and upholding its close partnership with the Liberal government. When Bill C-39 was first tabled in parliament, CLC President Bea Bruske stated that although the labour bureaucracy opposed the government’s planned restrictions on the right to strike, there were elements of Carney’s Build Canada Better Act that were extremely positive. “There are things in this bill that unions have fought for and that will improve protections for workers... We welcome these measures,” Bruske declared. “But on the right to strike the government broke its promise to workers.”

This lame response was hardly surprising, since the trade union bureaucracy has been a central player in buttressing Prime Minister Mark Carney’s nationalist trade war agenda. The trade war triggered by US President Donald Trump and his “America First” drive to annex Canada by crashing its economy prompted corporate Canada to respond with counter-tariffs and efforts to strengthen economic and military partnerships with other countries, including the European imperialist powers.

The unions have argued that workers have the same interests as their

bosses and that everyone must pull together in “Team Canada,” as the Carney government is arming Canadian imperialism for world war and opening up the country for billionaire oligarchs to invest in.

As Bruske put it in a statement released ahead of Bill C-39’s presentation, “Canada’s unions are part of Team Canada. We have our elbows up. We are ready to build, invest and fight for Canadian jobs. But we can’t have our elbows up against Trump with our hands tied at the bargaining table.

“The right to strike is what gives us the power to bargain for better wages, safer workplaces and greater job security. Weakening that power will not create greater stability or labour peace. It risks doing the opposite.”

Bruske and her fellow union bureaucrats do not see the right to strike as a weapon for workers to fight against the class war onslaught of the ruling elite, but as leverage for union bureaucrats to secure “partnerships” with big business and government ministers to manage “labour peace.”

As every worker knows from bitter experience, unions have over the past four decades used this “right” in the collective bargaining process to impose one round of concessions after another on the workers they claim to represent. Bruske’s appeal to the government therefore comes from an ally concerned that the draconian restrictions on the right to strike will produce a social explosion that the industrial police force of the union apparatus will struggle to control.

These have been the main concerns to which the CLC leadership has returned to repeatedly in the intervening six weeks. This week, as Carney hosted European Union representatives at a summit in Montreal, the CLC’s Canadian Council released a joint statement with the European Trade Union Confederation in which the well-paid union bureaucrats on both sides of the Atlantic lent their fulsome support to the creation of the new alliance for imperialist war and economic plunder that the Canadian and European bourgeoisies are seeking to craft.

On October 29, the CLC then announced in a statement the creation of a “national labour war room to support unions facing government intervention and coordinate their response to the proposed strike restrictions in Bill C-39.” The move would bring together “legal, political and communications resources to defend affected unions and their members.”

It is clear, however, that the military-style command centre the union leaders wanted to invoke with their choice of name will be directed exclusively against rank-and-file workers who try to take up a political struggle against the government’s anti-worker crackdown, while the union bureaucrats will maintain their role as friendly advisers to the former central banker Carney.

As Bruske was cited in the statement as saying, “Bill C-39 could leave Canada facing years of labour conflict and costly court battles. Businesses want to get goods moving, reach new markets and build major projects. Years spent fighting workers in court won’t accomplish any of that.”

This remark is revealing in several respects.

First, Bruske is offering her advice and the services of the CLC’s union apparatuses to corporate Canada as it seeks “new markets,” to “get goods moving” and so on. Under conditions of deepening conflicts among the major powers for a new redivision of the world, these critical tasks for the ruling class demand support for rearmament and war. This is where the union bureaucracies’ enthusiasm for “Team Canada” ultimately leads.

Second, the only possible way in which Bruske can imagine workers “fighting” the onslaught on their rights and conditions launched by the governments is through the capitalist courts, which invariably side with the employers and government. Her warnings about industrial unrest show that the very idea of class struggle is for her and the rest of the bureaucracy beyond the pale.

Legal challenges to back-to-work legislation and violations of collective bargaining agreements by the bosses or governments are a tried and tested

method employed by the bureaucracy to demobilize workers. By the time these lengthy legal proceedings ever reach a decision, a court ruling, even in the unlikely event it is delivered in favour of the workers, has virtually no practical impact.

For example, the unions in Ontario shut down a burgeoning movement for a political general strike against the Doug Ford Tory government in 2019 after Ford introduced Bill 124, which imposed a 1 percent cap on annual wage increases for over a million public sector workers for three years. A court ruling came only in 2022, by which time the unions had already agreed to contracts with the 1 percent cap in them. Workers thus suffered severe real pay cuts during a period of high inflation driven by the pandemic and the beginning of the US-NATO war on Russia in Ukraine.

At a press conference held October 29 after releasing the statement, Bruske was asked whether the CLC would call a general strike to protest the government’s attack on the right to strike of a member union. “The rest of the labour movement has said we will step up in every single way that you need us to, whether it’s resources, whether it is financial, whether it’s taking actions. And it could cumulate to a day of action, 100 percent it could cumulate to that,” she declared, making clear that the government has nothing to fear from the CLC.

Bruske and the CLC bureaucracy’s support for the government has met with opposition from rank-and-file workers, environmental and indigenous groups as well as anti-poverty activists. CLC officials thus felt compelled to convene a kickoff telephone and internet “townhall” meeting on October 13 to elaborate its “fightback” plan against the attack on the right to strike. Bruske admitted that perhaps the CLC had been “too polite” in its approach to the Liberal government. But now the CLC meant business. A three-pronged offensive would now be launched, she declared.

Workers at the meeting were encouraged to write their Member of Parliament to make known their opposition to sections of the bill. They should also seek to arrange a direct, face-to-face meeting with their MP. And if that wasn’t enough, the CLC called a “National Day of Action” scheduled for two days hence for a Thursday, noon-time information picket at selected constituency offices, i.e., a time guaranteed to exclude the vast majority of workers with jobs. As subsequently reported by various news outlets, “dozens” of protesters (mostly full-time union officials) gathered here and there across the country.

During the question-and-answer period of the meeting, an audience member asked if workers could strike even if the federal Canadian Industrial Relations Board (CIRB) had issued a back-to-work order. Bruske was careful with her words. Well, yes, she said, workers could strike if they want, but they would be on their own if they did. That would have to be a wildcat strike. She meticulously avoided placing the CLC anywhere near such an action.

Mark Hancock, the national president of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, was the most outspoken. He began by saying, “We try to operate within the rules and laws in place,” but sometimes they have to be fought. It had been noted in the meeting that CUPE had passed a resolution promising “defiance” should any strike be illegalized.

But a close reading of the resolution leaves much to be desired. Strike action is not mentioned. But more years-long appeals to the courts are. Already, legal briefs have been filed over the government’s use of the previous dubiously worded version of Section 107 of the labour code that was used to shut down key strikes by orders from the CIRB on the docks, on the railways, at the airports and at Canada Post.

Workers must take the fight to defend the right to strike into their own hands by building rank-and-file committees in opposition to the nationalist, pro-corporate union bureaucracies. These committees must mobilize the industrial and political power of the working class across Canada and internationally to stop capitalist austerity, rearmament and

war, and the destruction of democratic and social rights.

Above all, a political break with the unions' alliance with the Liberals and New Democrats is a precondition for this fight, since the defence of workers' social and democratic rights demands the establishment of a workers' government committed to socialist policies.



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