Over 1,000 workers fighting for wage, benefit improvements in 2 strikes in British Columbia

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Two significant strikes by workers in strategic sectors in British Columbia point to the ongoing growth of working-class opposition to corporate Canada's agenda of austerity and the gutting of worker rights.

Almost 1,300 miners at the country's largest open-pit copper mine near Kamloops and about 120 longshoremen in Prince Rupert, a significant port for exports to Asia-Pacific markets, are fighting for real wage increases and improvements to working conditions.

The miners have been on strike at the Highland Valley Copper mine since October 24 against Teck Resources.

Members of the United Steelworkers Local 7619, they are fighting for improved wages and health benefits, particularly to treat the ill effects of silica dust, and against the company's demand for a 25 percent cut in their pensions. The pit returned a $499 million net profit for the company last year. Teck is near to closing a multi-billion dollar merger deal with global mining giant Anglo-American.

In Prince Rupert, the longshore workers, members of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), are in the seventh week of a strike against bulk exporter Trigon Pacific Terminals in pursuit of a wage increase, job security and changes to relieve grueling work schedules. Trigon is an exporter of coal, petroleum coke and liquefied petroleum gas products throughout Asia-Pacific markets.

The strike takes place as the port of Prince Rupert is roiled by overlapping labour disputes by SGS Minerals technicians, who test and prepare bulk shipments, and locked-out barge refuellers at Wolverine Terminals.

At both strikes, workers have accused management of deploying scab labour to keep at least a minimal operational viability. In Prince Rupert, the Canada Industrial Relations Board (CIRB), faced with blatant strike-breaking actions by Trigon, ruled on October 27 that the company was in violation of a 2025 federal anti-scab law, which was hailed by the New Democrats (NDP) and the Canadian trade union bureaucracy as a major step forward for worker rights.

Longshore workers note that Trigon has not complied with the ruling and continue to deploy replacement workers without sanction from the labour tribunal. Already, in strikes at the Bank of Canada, Canadian Pacific Kansas City railways, Rogers Communications and elsewhere, similar labour court rulings have not resulted in even a fine against the defiant companies.

The apparent powerlessness of the CIRB in the face of the corporations' blatant violation of labour law stands in stark contrast to the relentless enforcement of its rulings against workers. Successive federal Liberal governments, working hand in hand with the trade union bureaucracies, have used CIRB rulings under Section 107 of the Canada Labour Code to force an end to countless strikes, including by dock, rail, airline and postal workers.

The British Columbia strikes are occurring just as the Liberal Carney government is preparing to pass into law its pro-corporate Building Canada Strong Act, Bill C-39. Alongside weakening safety and environmental regulations and indigenous rights, it will virtually obliterate what remains of the right to strike for federal workers in key sectors of the economy.

Faced with growing outrage from strikers both at Trigon and at Teck Resources and steady reports of serious physical confrontations on the picket lines, the British Columbia Federation of Labour (BCFED) felt compelled to issue a "hot edict" for materials produced or shipped to or from the strikebound Trigon Terminal and the Teck Resources copper mine.

The edict, also known as a "hot cargo" action, asks workers to refrain from handling, storing or transporting any materials of a strikebound company. Such declarations are heavily restricted or entirely outlawed across most North American jurisdictions. However, massive worker unrest in the province during the early 1980s culminated in the Operation Solidarity movement. A court ruling, in a loophole laden sop to the union bureaucracies, stated that workers have the right to appeal for secondary economic pressure during a strike or lockout.

Since then, most union collective agreements in BC contain clauses specifically protecting workers from

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disciplinary action if they refuse to handle “hot cargo.” However, the BCFED has been reluctant to initiate “hot edict” declarations over many decades, claiming it must only be used as a last resort.

When miners from Teck Resources set up picket lines outside the Vancouver Wharves terminal on November 7 to enforce the “hot edict,” ILWU workers briefly refused to handle a copper shipment. Federal and provincial labour boards, however, were quick to act. Following a November 7 cease and desist return-to-work order from the CIRB for federally regulated port workers, the BC labour board issued an expedited interim order on November 8 barring USW members from picketing at or near the terminal.

Under the BC Labour Relations Code, unions are generally restricted to picketing at their direct workplace or sites where their employer actively performs struck work. Since Vancouver Wharves is operated by an independent third party, PKM Canada Services Inc., rather than Teck Resources, the board ruled that picketing the location was prohibited secondary picketing.

Workers, however, returned to picket the wharves on November 9, prompting terminal operator PKM and the BC Maritime Employers Association to launch a civil lawsuit and injunction application in the BC Supreme Court. They insisted that the labour board orders were insufficient to protect the port from further disruption and therefore police should be mobilized to enforce the orders. Subsequently, pickets at the wharves were withdrawn, and union lawyers approached the provincial Supreme Court to argue that it had already given assurances that unions would respect the labour board’s previous ruling.

The BCFED’s attempt to strike a militant pose in support of the striking workers with a “hot edict” came less than two weeks after the closely aligned NDP suffered a crushing defeat in the October 24 provincial elections. The voting out of David Eby’s NDP government did not reflect mass enthusiasm for the right-wing BC Conservatives but was much more bound up with a collapse in support for the trade union-backed NDP, which suffered a decline of more than 200,000 votes compared to the last election.

Over the preceding nine years, the BCFED worked closely with the NDP as it enforced austerity, continued the fiscal framework of its right-wing BC Liberal predecessor, and served as one of the strongest provincial allies of the federal Liberal government.

The Carney government’s Bill C-39, now awaiting the third and final reading in the House of Commons, would expressly empower the labour minister, once a legal strike or lockout has begun, to direct the CIRB to illegalize worker job action, extend a collective agreement and/or impose binding dispute resolution. The minister could consider a mediator’s report and assess whether the stoppage adversely affects, or may affect, the “national interest.” The language of the bill is written to withstand constitutional challenges filed by the unions when the Liberals dubiously used a vague clause in Section 107 of the Canada Labour Code to bypass parliament and unilaterally end strikes.

The union bureaucracies at the federal level have objected to C-39, not because they are averse to blocking strikes, but because they believe this is best done through the union apparatus and “collective bargaining” rather than government orders, which carry the risk of provoking a political conflict with the state that the union bureaucrats would struggle to control. The union bureaucracies have for decades been assigned the role of policing their memberships to ensure that any job actions do not extend beyond the legal straitjackets imposed by the state.

The union apparatus vehemently defends this framework because its privileges, high salaries and expense accounts depend on effectively suppressing any worker action that goes beyond the legal and political boundaries set by the state. The application of this corporate-friendly system is clearly evident in the currently unfolding strikes by longshore workers and copper miners in British Columbia.

The capitulation of the BCFED to the pro-employer labour board rulings underscores that strikers in Prince Rupert and at the Teck Resources mine can only win support for their struggle throughout the working class by rebelling against the suffocating union apparatus. They must build rank-and-file committees to seize control of their job action from the USW and ILWU bureaucracies and unify with workers fighting for similar demands across Canada and North America. These include the more than 1,200 USW members on strike for over three months at National Steel Car in Hamilton, Ontario, to get rid of a barbaric piecework system.

The intervention of the state on the side of the bosses shows once again that workers are faced first and foremost with a political struggle. The fight for healthcare, job security and decent wages is a fight against capitalist austerity and war that requires an industrial and political counteroffensive by the working class for workers’ power and the use of society’s resources to meet social needs, not private profit.

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