

Union “militancy” vs. mobilizing Canada Post workers in a political struggle: A correspondence with a former Canadian Union of Postal Workers official

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Socialist Equality Party (Canada) members have supported workers at Canada Post over recent months in the establishment of the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee (PWRFC). The PWRFC aims to seize control of the contract struggle from the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) bureaucracy, which is in a corporatist partnership with the crown corporation’s management and federal Liberal government. Rejecting the CUPW apparatus’ insistence that Canada Post be run as a profit-making concern, the PWRFC demands that the postal service operate as a public utility, with decisions on wages, workplace safety, workloads, and other conditions determined by the rank and file.

In the days leading up to and at its founding meeting on June 16, postal workers reviewed and discussed the committee’s founding statement. It declares in part,

In opposition to the conspirators in Canada Post management, the federal government and the CUPW bureaucracy, we reject the claim that Canada Post must be run as a profit-making corporate enterprise. We oppose the use of new technologies to step up exploitation. We demand that workers on the shop floor make decisions about the operation of the postal service, the implementation of new technologies, and our wages and benefits. The Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee will fight for these objectives in a political struggle against the corporatist partnership between CUPW, corporate management and the Liberal government. We will do so in alliance with workers throughout the logistics sector, workers across Canada—public and private—who all have a stake in our struggle to defend public services and worker rights, and postal workers throughout the world.

As part of its fight to establish the rank-and-file committee, the *World Socialist Web Site* has sharply criticized left-talking “militant” CUPW bureaucrats who have postured as defenders of workers’ interests. A key experience in this regard was the presidency of Mike Palecek, a former member of the pseudo-left Fightback group, affiliated with the International Marxist Tendency. Palecek was propelled to the presidency to control widespread anger among rank-and-file postal workers following the union leadership’s capitulation to the Tory Harper government’s strikebreaking legislation in 2011. Under Palecek’s leadership, CUPW campaigned for the election of the pro-war, pro-austerity Trudeau Liberal government in 2015 and sold out the 2018 postal workers’ strike.

Rank-and-file Canada Post workers have written in to the WSWs to

share their experiences of ruthless exploitation and union-backed concessions. Individuals associated with the bureaucracy have also inquired about the committee. One of these was Matthew Aitken, a former CUPW local president. Aitken wrote to us in the lead-up to the PWRFC’s founding meeting:

I am interested in the committee because of my involvement with the CUPW over the last six years. I was local president in Kelowna from 2018 to 2020, and in Winnipeg from 2021 to 2023. I helped get Roland Schmidt elected to 3rd [vice president] in 2022, and worked on Julee Sanderson’s campaign [for union president] last year. I stood at the entrance to convention last year holding a sign that read, “Vote for Julee,” and I asked delegates to vote for Julee to save our union and I meant it. I am very much opposed to the actions of the CUPW’s national executive board and believe our union needs wholesale reform.

Given the bureaucracy’s intimate partnership with management and pervasive management harassment of rank-and-file workers at Canada Post, we had serious concerns about allowing Aitken to join the PWRFC’s founding meeting, which involved Canada Post workers who could have been identified and victimized. Moreover, the WSWs is familiar with union bureaucrats seeking a radical “left” cover for their rotten opportunist politics. WSWs writer Steve Hill therefore forwarded Aitken a draft of the PWRFC’s founding statement and requested a further discussion in order to determine whether his interest in the committee was genuine.

Aitken responded angrily,

Hi Steve,

I read the discussion paper and take issue with some of the points raised. I would also like to ask the authors why they think Brother Palecek lied to the membership. I don’t have the same opinion, and when I read those lines, I can clearly tell whomever wrote them did not read NEB [National Executive Board] minutes from Palecek’s time as president. I think they would find that Palecek was essentially an island on that board, and as any person working with committees should know, the decision of that is the committee’s, not necessarily the president. Palecek dissented on many of the votes and issues that I believe the authors were

referencing without being specific. If it were journalism, it would be shoddy.

I don't mind some of the plans listed in the document, but I find some of them to be very naive. I think the authors are either out of touch with their workfloors or they have never actually been on a CUPW workflow.

I'm uncomfortable with the idea of meeting alone with a group of non-CUPW members to be screened to be able to join a group of CUPW members. I do not have time to meet with a group of people who will deliberate on my character and deem me worthy or unworthy of joining. I don't need anyone's approval in that way. I am a postal worker. Delivered mail on Friday.

I wish you all the best with your organizing of postal workers. Please do not reach out to me with offers like this in the future. I am no longer interested in being involved.

In solidarity,
Matthew Aitken

Hill sent the following letter in response to Aitken, who has failed to respond after several weeks.

Dear Brother Matthew,

I think it's important that we clarify some of the issues you raised in your last email.

The Sunday, June 16 meeting was a political meeting with workers who are CUPW members and was organized with the assistance of Socialist Equality Party members. Many of the workers we engage with around the world are wary of being exposed to company (or union) snoops during such meetings, so we take our responsibility to protect their identity and interests seriously.

This approach is all the more important at Canada Post, where, as I am sure you are aware, management harassment and intimidation is a major issue and the CUPW bureaucracy colludes with this same management to attack workers' rights. We make no bones about the fact that we are opposed in principle to inviting current union bureaucrats to these discussions. In the case of someone like yourself, who previously held a senior position within the union but says they have broken with the bureaucracy, we make no apologies for vetting them thoroughly before deciding whether we should allow them to attend. Anyone committed to advancing the interests of rank-and-file workers will easily understand why.

Workers who are drawn to the *World Socialist Web Site* appreciate our political analysis, including unmatched coverage of the struggles of the working class around the world, because they know from bitter personal experience that the unions are no longer fighting organizations of the working class. The WSWS provides the context and history necessary for the working class to understand the current state of the world, how we got here and what to do next—including, crucially, why the unions and the political parties they support, like the NDP, have failed the working class.

Our plans and demands are far from naive and are in fact the result of more than a century of serious analysis and collective experience. Our socialist-internationalist political program is the only solution to the problems of a world wracked by economic crises, a global pandemic, an ongoing genocide in Gaza and the looming danger of a nuclear war.

Over the past four decades, we have explained how the trade union bureaucracies have become transformed into appendages of the corporations and state apparatus. Staffed by well-paid bureaucrats who have more in common with the bosses and government ministers than the workers they claim to represent, these organizations have been the main obstacle that has prevented all workers, postal workers included, from fighting back against the sustained attack on wages and living standards

imposed by the ruling elite. They play this role not because of the failings of individual leaders, but because they are inseparably tied to the nation-state and defend capitalist private profit. Under conditions of the globalization of production and an ever-deepening capitalist crisis, the union bureaucracies are compelled to side with their "own" corporate elites as they step up the exploitation of the working class to stay "competitive" with their rivals.

Our criticism of former CUPW President Mike Palecek is not based on whether he voted this way or that on a particular issue, or whether he "lied." Rather, it concerns his fraudulent claims, in line with his long-time associates in the pseudo-left (and the misnamed) International Marxist Tendency, that the union could be transformed into an organization fighting for workers' interests. Our position is that this "militant" program was aimed at maintaining the bureaucracy's credibility in the eyes of the workers after the miserable betrayal of 2011, and covering up its deepening collaboration with the Trudeau Liberal government after 2015.

In the run-up to the October 2015 federal election, Palecek played a leading role in the unions' "Anybody but Conservative" campaign. This initiative, endorsed by all the major unions in Canada, promoted the Liberals as a "progressive" alternative, paving the way for their return to power after a decade of Conservative rule under Stephen Harper.

In the contract negotiations of 2016, Mike Palecek led the CUPW bureaucracy in vehemently opposing any job action by postal workers on the grounds that nothing should be allowed to "disrupt" the work of a Liberal government task force into the future of the post office. The union offered to work with big business to make Canada Post better serve their needs and then signed on to a two-year contract that left in place all the concessions extorted from workers in 2011.

CUPW mounted a "Save Canada Post" campaign calling for developing new revenue streams, like postal banking, endorsing the proposition that Canada Post must be run as a profit-making enterprise.

Unsurprisingly, the Liberal government-appointed task force proposed a whole slew of anti-worker cost-cutting measures, including the elimination of five-day-a-week mail delivery, privatization of 800 additional postal stations, consolidation of postal-sorting plants, and pension cuts.

In 2018, despite being armed with an overwhelming strike mandate, Palecek refused to call a nationwide strike. Instead, he restricted postal workers to a campaign of regional rotating strikes, which he himself acknowledged was aimed at having as little impact on Canada Post's business operations as possible. Palecek and the CUPW apparatus claimed that by keeping workers on a tight leash and issuing no appeal for broader working class support in the defence of public services and workers' rights, a back-to-work law could be avoided. This only emboldened the big-business Liberal government.

The CUPW bureaucrats worked to avoid a serious clash between postal workers and the government because it would have exposed the need to expand the struggle, rally support from the working class and transform the strike into a working class political struggle against the Liberal government and big business as a whole. The CUPW bureaucracy, as well as the Canadian Labour Congress, feared this prospect more than anything else.

As I viewed with my own eyes this week, CUPW continues to follow the same strategy. Using banners at a local Canada Post depot, the union is mounting a miserable public appeal urging Justin Trudeau to show "respect" for postal workers, i.e., the same man who oversaw the criminalization of their strike in 2018. The union has no intention now, or ever in the future, to seriously confront not just particular governments, but the economic system that offers only greater exploitation to the working class.

We urge you to study the record of Palecek's history and draw the

necessary political conclusions from it. Above all, these are that nothing can be achieved for rank-and-file postal workers by seeking to “reform” the corporatist union bureaucracy and that new organizations of class struggle, rank-and-file committees, must be established to lead workers in a political fight and unify them with their colleagues around the world.

Our offer remains open to arrange a discussion with you on these issues and any other points of disagreement you may have.

Fraternally,
Steve Hill



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact