

CN and CPKC prepare to lock out rail workers across Canada

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Two of the largest railroads in North America, Canadian National (CN) and Canadian Pacific Kansas City (CPKC), have announced plans to lock out 9,300 workers who are members of the Teamsters Canada Rail Conference (TCRC) on August 22. By threatening to effectively paralyze rail freight traffic in Canada, the railway bosses are seeking to pressure the big business Liberal government to intervene forthwith, strip railway workers of their rights to bargain collectively and strike, and impose far-reaching concessions on health and safety through binding arbitration.

The companies made their lockout announcement on Friday after the Canadian Industrial Relations Board (CIRB) ruled that the railroads do not meet the legal definition of an “essential service” under the Canadian Labour Code, and that workers, therefore, cannot be blocked from striking or the companies from enacting a lockout during a contract dispute.

“There is no doubt that a work stoppage at CPKC/CN would result in inconvenience, economic hardship and, possibly, as some groups and organizations have suggested, harm to Canada’s global reputation as a reliable trading partner,” the CIRB declared.

“While such possible harm is by no means insignificant, these are not factors that are to be considered by the Board when addressing a referral under section 87.4” of the Canadian Labour Code, which pertains to threats to public safety.

The CIRB’s decision triggered the start of a 13-day “cooling off” period before any strike or lockout can take place.

CN responded to the CIRB’s ruling by calling on the Canadian government to enforce binding arbitration under the pro-employer labour code, to “protect Canada’s economy,” saying it had no choice but to move forward with a lockout if there was no resolution by August 22. Likewise, CPKC has demanded the TCRC forego its members’ rights and accept that their wages and working conditions be subject to binding arbitration.

The rail companies, which ruthlessly exploit rail workers under dangerous working conditions so as to extract maximum profits, enjoy overwhelming ruling-class support for their appeal to the government to intervene to rob railworkers of their collective bargaining rights.

North America’s railways are viewed by both Canada’s

Justin Trudeau-led Liberal government and the Biden administration in the US as critical to national security. According to the Railway Association of Canada, the country’s railways transport 70 percent of intercity surface freight and half of Canada’s exports. In Canada and the US, they serve as a critical network for the transportation of raw materials for industry, imports and exports, and the military equipment the imperialist powers need to wage war around the world. When US rail workers were set to strike in late 2022, the Biden administration intervened directly to block their job action and succeeded, with the support of the Democrats in Congress, in enforcing a strike ban that met the companies’ demands.

TCRC public affairs director Christopher Monette feigned surprise at the companies’ announcement, declaring the lockout threat “unexpected and needlessly antagonizing.”

However, this follows precisely the same pattern as in 2022, when the then Canadian Pacific locked out 3,000 engineers, conductors, and yardmen at its operations across Canada. The TCRC did not issue a strike notice until 24 hours after the lockout began. Soon afterwards, the union bureaucracy bowed to the company and Liberal government’s demand that the contract dispute be submitted to binding arbitration, robbing workers of their right to vote on a tentative agreement and locking them into wage increases which were eaten up by inflation.

“With at least thirteen days of negotiations still ahead, this move represents an unnecessary escalation that goes against the principles of good faith bargaining that CN and CPKC claims to uphold,” Monette remarked.

Having laboured under expired contracts since December 31, 2023, workers at both CN and CPKC voted nearly unanimously earlier this year to authorize a strike. But with the approach of the May 22 strike deadline, then Labour Minister Seamus O’Regan turned to the unelected, pro-employer CIRB to block a strike by requesting it investigate a strike’s “potential impacts to the health and safety of Canadians” under Labour Code Section 87.4. This outrageous interference by the government in the bargaining process was not deemed to be an “unnecessary escalation” by the TCRC. In fact, the union rolled over and accepted what was a strike ban in all but name.

With the Labour Minister’s intervention overriding the

original strike deadline, rail workers made clear their determination to fight the companies' concession demands by voting in June by nearly 99 percent to reauthorize strike action.

At every step of the talks, the TCRC has met the companies' aggressive demands for attacks on crew scheduling, work hours, and fatigue management with conciliation and have meekly accepted the Trudeau Liberal government's bureaucratic maneuvers to delay a strike.

The TCRC leadership offered in June to stagger negotiations between CN and CPKC. "Staggering the negotiations is a sensible solution that would minimize disruptions and allow all parties to address their concerns in a more structured and productive manner," said TCRC President Paul Boucher.

"A work stoppage has never ever been our end goal. Our members at both carriers simply want a fair and equitable collective agreement—one that does not compromise their quality of life or their safety. Both CN and CPKC are standing in the way of that."

What the union meant by "minimizing disruption" was a proposal that would deprive workers of the immense power they would enjoy by striking together and divide them arbitrarily by employer, even as the rail bosses collude to impose concessions and implore the government to illegalize any worker job action.

A "staggered" strike deadline would allow the rail barons to pick off workers at CN or CPKC in isolation before moving on to the remainder of the workforce a few weeks later, all under the cover of the "fair and equitable" bargaining approved by the TCRC. This method has been used by Unifor and its Canadian Auto Workers predecessor for decades to divide autoworkers at the Detroit Three by selecting a "target company" during each round of bargaining that sets a "pattern" for workers at all three companies. This tactic has facilitated the enforcement of round after round of concessions.

For their own reasons, the companies' rejected the TCRC's proposal for "staggered" deadlines. Confident in the cowardice and complicity of the Teamsters bureaucracy, they prefer to use the common contract extension deadline and the threat of continent-wide economic disruption to prevail on the union-backed Trudeau government to intervene and take the lead in enforcing their attacks on rail workers' health and safety.

Earlier this year, Teamsters Canada President François Laporte joined a meeting with the US ambassador to Canada, Labour Minister O'Regan and other union leaders, convened at the behest of President Joe Biden. The meeting was a cross-border conspiracy to suppress the class struggle in Canada and the United States. Washington and Ottawa have worked together to suppress powerful strikes by West Coast dockworkers and to keep autoworkers across North America divided along national lines when their contracts expired simultaneously last year.

There is immense anger among rail workers, who want to make up for years of concessions by the TCRC and the surging

cost of living across Canada. CN and CPKC workers must prepare to take strike action as soon as possible, instead of leaving the initiative in the hands of the companies in the form of a lockout or binding arbitration. But to do so, they must recognize that they are in a political fight against the rail bosses and the entire ruling class, which is determined to make rail workers bear the burden of the deepening economic crisis and the imperialist war effort around the world.

In 2022, CP Rail workers established the CP Workers Rank-and-File Committee to advance their interests independently of the union bureaucracy and to set out a strategy to defeat the union-government-corporate conspiracy. This initiative must be revived, uniting workers at CN and CPKC to take control of the contract fight and place power in the hands of the rank and file. A genuine fight for what rail workers need, and not what the companies declare they can afford, will put the rank and file in direct conflict with the union-Liberal-New Democratic Party governmental alliance and its cross-border conspiracy with the Biden administration.

A successful struggle by Canadian rail workers must therefore include a direct appeal for support from their brothers and sisters in the United States and Mexico. CPKC boasts that it operates the first and only single-line rail network connecting Canada, the US and Mexico. The CN network meanwhile connects Vancouver in the west and Halifax in the east to the port of New Orleans in Louisiana. A Canadian rail workers rank-and-file committee would work to break down the national divisions which the unions and the companies enforce on workers even as they ensure the free flow of goods and capital across borders. It would also endeavour to broaden the struggle to other sections of workers across Canada, who confront the same attacks and are the social force that can stop the ruling elite's onslaught for austerity and war in its tracks.

All rail workers who are interested in this perspective should fill out the form below. The WSWS will provide all assistance necessary in forming and building a rank-and-file committee as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.



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