

Canada's rail workers in political battle with Trudeau and Biden governments following strike shutdown

Roger Jordan
23 August 2024

Railroaders: tell us what you think about the government intervention against the strike. Fill out the form at the end of this article; all submissions will be kept anonymous.

Some 9,300 engineers, conductors, yard workers, and rail controllers at Canadian National (CN) and Canadian Pacific Kansas City (CPKC) confront an all-out political struggle with the Liberal government following Thursday's shutdown of their struggle by Labour Minister Steven MacKinnon.

The state-sanctioned corporate dictatorship on the railways that the government is imposing robs workers of their basic rights to strike and to vote on the terms of their own contract. The only way to successfully resist this attack on all workers is if rail workers make their struggle the spearhead of a mass political counter-offensive by the working class for workers' rights and decent-paying, safe jobs, and against austerity and war.

The decision was taken by the Trudeau government in close consultation with the Biden administration, which demanded a resolution to the dispute to safeguard the interests of cross-border trade and continent-wide supply chains. The announcement was made less than 17 hours after the rail companies locked out their workers at 12:01am Thursday.

MacKinnon spoke Thursday with acting US Labour Secretary Julie Su prior to invoking section 107 of the Canada Labour Code, which allows the government to order the unelected Canadian Industrial Relations Board (CIRB) to impose arbitration on the parties. The decision was also made at the urging of corporate Canada, with leading business associations denouncing the impending strike as a threat to "national security."

The Teamsters Canada Rail Conference (TCRC), the bargaining agent for the workers, responded to the announcement of binding arbitration by immediately taking down picket lines at CN and complying with company plans to resume work Friday.

AT CPKC, where the TCRC filed a strike notice last Sunday following the announced plans for a lockout, they kept pickets in place.

Teamsters officials indicated they would meet Friday with CPKC and CIRB officials, where they intended to challenge the constitutionality of the decision to order a strike ban at CPKC. Shortly before 10am eastern time, the TCRC filed a 72-hour strike notice at CN, which would allow workers to walk off the job Monday morning.

The fact that the Teamsters bureaucracy felt compelled to make a show of challenging the Trudeau government's outrageous diktat reflects their concern that they could lose control of the seething anger among rail workers over dangerous working conditions. They have voted overwhelmingly twice this year for strike action, but were repeatedly prevented from taking job action through the combined efforts of the government and TCRC bureaucracy, which worked to confine the dispute to the anti-worker "labour relations" system.

At the same time, Teamsters officials have made clear that their principal concern is to ensure that they are involved in imposing a concessions-filled contract on the workers through the bargaining process.

Teamsters Canada national president Francois Laporte and International Brotherhood of Teamsters president Sean O'Brien participated in a rally outside CPKC headquarters in Calgary Friday morning to bolster their push to convince the government to let them work out what concessions should be imposed on workers at the bargaining table.

"We believe that the Supreme Court decision regarding our right to strike is a constitutional right. And we believe that the application of Article 107 (of the Canada Labour Code) is not valid. We are looking at our options regarding that situation," Laporte told the media Friday. "The best way to have a contract is at the bargaining table," he added.

Beyond the demand that union bureaucrats be allowed to work out the final terms of the contracts with CN and CPKC

management, this is all hot air. Friday's TCRC's strike notice at CN included the statement that the differences between the parties are not "insurmountable" and expressed the hope that talks could prevent any "further work stoppage." In fact, management has been demanding sweeping concessions for months, including the ability to forcibly relocate workers for up to 90 days and make scheduling more unpredictable.

In 2022, the Teamsters helped buy time for the Biden administration to ban a strike, after workers rejected a deal proposed by a federal mediation board. Today, the union bureaucracy is trying to isolate the Canadian railroaders. No union official from among the AFL-CIO unions in the US or CLC unions in Canada has called for solidarity action.

The union bureaucracy is bitterly hostile to politically mobilizing rail workers at the head of a broader movement of the working class in opposition to the state-led onslaught on their wages and working conditions.

This is because they are in a corporatist alliance with big business and the government, aimed at suppressing the class struggle and implementing the ruling elite's class war agenda of austerity at home and imperialist war abroad. O'Brien has taken his promotion of economic nationalism and trade war measures so far that he could deliver a speech to the fascist Republican Party convention last month.

The Trudeau government moved to shut down the rail workers' strike due to the key role the railroads play in the economic and geostrategic interests of North America's twin imperialist powers. CPKC and CN are part of a transnational network stretching from northern Canada to the US Gulf Coast and ports in Mexico. This network is central to the functioning of US-dominated supply chains across the continent, which serve as a base of operations for Washington and Ottawa's great power conflicts against their rivals, above all China.

The extent of Washington's involvement in pushing for the government-dictated end to the strike was underscored by a statement from the White House's National Economic Council (NEC), which confirmed that its supply chain task force was closely monitoring the situation for weeks.

"This work, involving multiple agencies across the federal government, has included extensive analysis and engagement with industry and other stakeholders to assess and mitigate impacts for U.S. consumers, businesses and workers," a White House statement said, adding that the NEC has "been in touch with the parties."

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau provided a full-throated defence of his government's attempt to impose a corporate dictatorship on North America's railroads. "Collective bargaining is always the best way forward. When that is no longer a foreseeable option—when we are facing serious

consequences to our supply chains and the workers who depend on it—governments must act," he wrote on X. That is to say, whenever workers are in a strong position to go on the offensive and threaten the ruling elite's core interests, they will feel the full force of the capitalist state as it seeks to crush their struggle.

Faced with the concerted assault of the Canadian and American governments, rail workers at CN and CPKC must recognize that they are in a political struggle to prevail. The urgent task is to fight to politically mobilize the working class as an independent force against the rail barons. These oligarchs, backed by Biden and Trudeau, are determined to impose slave-like conditions on the railways to secure the imperialist powers' home front in a rapidly developing world war.

This must include a special appeal to American railroaders to fight together with their Canadian brothers and sisters.

It must also include an unrelenting exposure of the anti-worker Liberal/union/New Democratic Party (NDP) alliance. Over its almost nine years in power, the Liberal government has developed close collaboration with the union bureaucracy, which it has relied on to smother workers' struggles. Inside parliament, the Liberals depend on the union-sponsored NDP for their majority, without which they would be in no position to spend tens of billions on militarism and war, and ban workers' strikes. These inconvenient truths did not stop NDP leader Jagmeet Singh from attempting to posture as a friend of rail workers and staunch critic of the very government his party props up. "The Liberals' actions are cowardly, anti-worker and proof that they will always cave to corporate greed, and Canadians will always pay for it," he declared.

Railroaders must build rank-and-file committees to fight against both the railroads and the union bureaucracy. This struggle must be waged on an international basis, with rail workers in Canada, the US, and beyond counterposing a socialist and internationalist program to secure the social rights of workers to the Trudeau and Biden governments' policies of austerity and war.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact