

# Canada's New Democrats posture as defenders of rail workers, while abetting Trudeau's strikebreaking

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6 September 2024

The determined struggle by 9,300 engineers, conductors, yardmen and controllers at Canada's two main freight railroads was ruthlessly suppressed by the big business Liberal government last month. Just hours after Canadian National (CN) and Canadian Pacific Kansas City (CPKC) locked out the workers as part of a transparent plan to enlist the government's support in imposing brutal concessions, Liberal Labour Minister Steven MacKinnon invoked the draconian powers of the Canada Labour Code to outlaw all worker job action and empower an arbitrator to dictate their contracts.

The workers were primed for a fight to overturn decades of concessions and put an end to a hazardous work regimen that in recent years has claimed the lives of numerous workers and taken an enormous psychological toll on countless more. The CN and CPKC workers repeatedly voted overwhelmingly for strike action and should have walked out well before management had the opportunity to lock them out. But they were not only up against the corporate dictatorship that pervades North America's railroads and the pro-war, pro-austerity Liberal government, but also the corporatist Teamsters union bureaucracy. The Teamsters Canada Rail Conference did everything to confine the workers' struggle to the pro-employer "collective bargaining" framework and bowed without a fight to the Liberal government's strikebreaking intervention.

The dispute is yet another graphic demonstration of why workers on the railroads and across all economic sectors must urgently build rank-and-file committees to seize control of their struggles for improved wages and conditions from the corrupt, pro-capitalist union bureaucrats. These committees must be used to make the broadest appeal to the working class in Canada, the United States and internationally for a political counteroffensive against the ruling elite's relentless drive to make workers pay for the capitalist crisis and imperialist war around the world. The basis for such a struggle is international working class unity and the recognition that social need, not private profit, should be the guiding principle of social and economic life.

## Pro-worker bluster from the NDP

The response of Canada's New Democratic Party (NDP) was aimed at preventing workers from drawing these fundamental conclusions by bolstering the discredited union bureaucracy and whitewashing the NDP's own central role in propping up the very government attacking rail workers' rights. For the past two-and-a-half years, the NDP has propped up the Trudeau government in a formal "confidence and supply

agreement," providing it with the votes necessary to implement its pro-corporate agenda of imperialist war abroad and class war at home, in a governmental alliance brokered by the trade union bureaucracy.

"Justin Trudeau has just sent a message to CN, CPKC and all big corporations—being a bad boss pays off," NDP leader Jagmeet Singh declared in a statement. "The Liberals' actions are cowardly, anti-worker and proof that they will always cave to corporate greed, and Canadians will always pay for it."

"There will be no end to lockouts now. Every employer knows they can get exactly what they want from Justin Trudeau by refusing to negotiate with their workers in good faith. And that puts the safety of workers and communities at risk," he added.

With the utmost cynicism, Singh told reporters that he would be prepared to break his party's alliance with the Liberal government and vote against any back-to-work legislation or bill interfering with the railroad workers' strike, blustering, "Whether it's a confidence motion or not, I don't care." When Singh ultimately decided to end the "confidence and supply" agreement this week for crass electoral considerations and to better position the NDP and its union sponsors as suppressors of worker opposition to the ruling elite's class war agenda, he did not even mention the rail workers' struggle as a major factor in his decision. Nor did he commit to bringing down the government in a confidence vote.

The NDP leader's outraged bursts of hot air should convince no one. Any attempt to portray Singh and his party as allies of the railroad workers in their struggle against the employers and the Liberal government is a malicious lie—the NDP is in fact a bought-and-paid-for tool of Canadian capital.

## The Liberals' assault on workers' rights and the role of the NDP and union bureaucracy in facilitating it

The criminalization of the railroad strike is just the latest instance of the Liberal government intervening to shut down a major strike. In 2018, the Trudeau government passed strikebreaking legislation to criminalize rotating strikes by postal workers; in 2021 they did the same to force dockworkers in Montreal back on the job. Last year, the Liberal government—using the same unelected, pro-employer Canada Industrial Relations Board and quasi-dictatorial powers granted it under the Canadian Labour Code that it used against the CN and CPKC workers—effectively illegalized a strike of West Coast dock workers and, with the connivance of their union leadership, bullied them into accepting a concessions-laden contract.

The Liberals' assault on workers' right to strike and collectively determine their contracts has only been possible due to the support they have received from the union bureaucracy and NDP. While keeping their hands clean with token votes against back-to-work laws, the NDP supported the Trudeau government throughout this period—ensuring its survival in numerous votes of confidence and then entering into a formal “confidence and supply” agreement with the Liberals in March 2022 that pledged to keep them in power until 2025. Significantly, the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), Canada's largest trade union federation, boasted of the key role it played in brokering the Liberal-NDP alliance and touted it as a “worker-friendly” and “progressive” agreement.

The agreement was the political embodiment of the corporatist alliance between the Liberals, the NDP and the trade union bureaucracy, in which the trade unions have guaranteed “labour peace” and “social stability” for Canada's ruling elite as they further deepened their partnership with US imperialism and waged a massive assault on the social position of the working class. Although Singh has now formally ended the parliamentary arrangement, demagogically declaiming that he has “ripped up” the deal, the political alliance between the Liberals, NDP and unions that has lasted for the past three decades remains. Both Singh and CLC President Bea Bruske have insisted that the main issue is opposing “Conservative cuts,” i.e., covering up for the Liberal austerity imposed with their collaboration and presenting the Canadian bourgeoisie's preferred party of government as a “progressive” alternative to the far-right demagogue Pierre Poilievre.

The Trudeau government, using the mandate provided to them by the NDP and the trade union bureaucracy, have spent billions to wage war against Russia in Ukraine and pledged tens of billions more to prepare for a military confrontation with China, while backing the murderous Netanyahu regime to the hilt in its genocidal assault on Gaza. The Liberals played a leading role in forcing workers to accept real wage cuts as inflation eviscerated living standards, while implementing a “post-pandemic” austerity program to force the working class to pay for the billions lavished on big business and pledged to the military.

### **Oppose the corporate agenda of imperialist aggression overseas and class war at home!**

The alliance between the trade union bureaucracy and the NDP with the Liberal government has been a critical tool for the Canadian ruling elite as it has sought to build the “robust” supply chains in critical industries necessary for Canadian and American imperialism to wage imperialist war abroad and compete with their geostrategic rivals. The suppression of the railroad workers' strike, like those of the dockworkers in Montreal and on the West Coast, is crucial to securing these supply chains. For this reason, the Biden administration coordinated closely with the Trudeau government to force the workers back on the job and ensure the continued flow of cross-border trade that is seen as essential for the construction of a protectionist North American bloc capable of competing with Washington and Ottawa's rivals in a new redivision of the world.

While the NDP has provided “political stability” in its parliamentary alliance with the Liberals, the union apparatus actively suppresses the class struggle—demobilizing the working class, confining their struggles to the state-dictated “collective bargaining process,” and ultimately implementing concession-laden contracts to preserve corporate profits and enforce austerity in the public sector.

In return, trade union leaders earn six-figure salaries and receive lucrative and influential appointments, forming a social caste with interests separate from and hostile to the working class. Bound to the state and the employers in a pro-capitalist corporatist alliance, the trade union

bureaucracy is especially committed to economic nationalism. Union bureaucrats consult alongside Liberal ministers and the bosses in negotiations on the Canada-US-Mexico Trade Agreement and the imposition of tariffs on Chinese-made goods.

With the full support of the trade union bureaucracy, the NDP has embraced its role as a “progressive” steward of Canadian capitalism—in its alliance with the Trudeau government federally and whenever it has held power at the provincial level. The NDP government under Bob Rae from 1990-1995 is still remembered with hatred by workers in Ontario. The union-backed premier imposed real wage cuts and unpaid furlough days on workers devastated by economic recession, paving the way for the right-wing onslaught of Mike Harris' “Common Sense Revolution.” Rae later joined the Liberals and currently serves as Canada's ambassador to the United Nations. Manitoba NDP Premier Gary Doer, who implemented tax cuts and balanced the provincial budget by enforcing austerity from 1999 to 2009, was so trusted by the ruling class that he was subsequently appointed ambassador to the United States by Conservative PM Stephen Harper. Current NDP premiers, like David Eby in British Columbia and Wab Kinew in Manitoba, carry on this legacy of “responsible” pro-capitalist government by Canada's social democrats.

Despite the thoroughly right-wing record of the NDP in its alliance with the Trudeau government and in power provincially, “militant” trade union bureaucrats and pseudo-left groups like Socialist Action and the misnamed Revolutionary Communist Party (formerly Fightback) continue to portray it as capable of being “pushed to the left” by pressure from the working class. Nothing could be further from the truth. While these forces may make the occasional criticism of Singh's collaboration with the Liberals, they purposefully obscure the role that the NDP and the trade union bureaucracy play in suppressing the class struggle and preventing any working class challenge to the ruling elite's agenda of war and reaction.

The urgent task facing railroad workers and the working class generally is to break politically and organizationally out of the straitjacket imposed upon them by the NDP and the union bureaucracy. This requires a political rebellion against the Liberal/union/NDP alliance and the building of new organizations of rank-and-file struggle independent of the bureaucratic union apparatuses. Above all, the construction of a socialist party of the working class, the Socialist Equality Party (Canada), to provide these struggles with the socialist internationalist perspective and revolutionary leadership that they need is the order of the day



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