

Air Canada demands government intervention to rob pilots of right to strike

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With a 72-hour strike or lockout notice deadline set for Sunday at 12:01 a.m. Eastern, Air Canada and other business interests have demanded that the union-backed Liberal government intervene to rob 5,200 pilots of their right to withhold their labour.

Air Canada spokesperson Christophe Hennebelle insisted Thursday that the company was committed to bargaining but that the pilots were making “unreasonable wage demands” which the company cannot meet and called on the government of Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to intervene to block a strike.

“We are bargaining. We are committed to reaching a deal. But we are saying that if that fails, the government should be ready to intervene and avoid the disruption,” Hennebelle insisted.

Despite the fact that a strike or lockout cannot legally take place until Wednesday, September 18, Air Canada announced that it would begin winding down its operations on Friday, putting a de facto lockout into gradual effect over the coming days to increase the pressure on the government to take action against the pilots.

It is estimated that a work stoppage at Air Canada, including its subsidiary Air Canada Rouge, could impact more than 110,000 passengers each day. Air Canada Express flights, which feed passengers to the main Air Canada hubs, will continue as the flights are operated by smaller companies Jazz Aviation and PAL Airlines.

Federal Labour Minister Steven MacKinnon has stated that both sides should “knuckle down” and reach an agreement before the strike deadline. While Trudeau declared on Friday that he would not “put my thumb on the scale on either side,” the prime minister told reporters, “We’re going to continue to put all the pressure we can on the parties to resolve things where they need to—at the bargaining table—as quickly as possible.”

This posture of neutrality should convince nobody. The reality is that the government has already been heavily involved in the talks, including by appointing a mediator in a bid to enforce an agreement in June. However, the 60-day mediation period expired in late August with no result. On Thursday, Labour Minister Steven MacKinnon directly participated in

talks with both sides in Toronto.

Big business is hoping that the Liberals will repeat the use of sweeping arbitrary powers through the unelected Canada Industrial Relations Board (CIRB) to keep pilots on the job and impose binding arbitration, as they did with rail workers at Canadian National and Canadian Pacific Kansas City last month. MacKinnon’s predecessor, Seamus O’Regan, similarly turned to the CIRB to force through a concessions contract on striking BC dockworkers last year after they voted twice to reject the deal.

When it banned the rail workers from striking, the Trudeau government consulted closely with the Biden administration, which was carefully monitoring the rail struggle due to the impact it would have had on North America’s supply chains. While there has yet to be any report publicly on similar consultations related to Air Canada, ruling elites on both sides of the border are determined to prevent a strike. Pointing to the impact of a suspension of Air Canada’s freight service on cross-border trade, a joint statement by the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, US Chamber of Commerce, and Business Council of Canada said, “Every year, millions of Canadians and Americans travel back and forth by air, as do critical, time sensitive goods. The Government of Canada must take swift action to avoid another labour disruption that negatively impacts cross-border travel and trade.”

Canadian Chamber of Commerce president Candace Laing argued at a press conference Thursday that the government had to step in against the pilots, arguing that arbitration, “can help bring the parties to a successful resolution and avoid all the potential impacts we’re here to talk about today.” Goldy Hyder, Chief Executive Officer of the Business Council of Canada, similarly argued for running roughshod over airline workers’ right to strike: “Canada cannot afford another major disruption to its transportation network. A labour disruption at Air Canada would ripple through our economy.”

The pilots, who are members of the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA), have been working under a contract that expired in June 2023. That deal was a nine-year concessions contract with sub-inflation annual pay raises ratified in 2014 after then-Prime Minister Stephen Harper illegalized strike action by pilots and other Air Canada workers in 2012, and the

CIRB sanctioned pilots for a sickout which was deemed an illegal “wildcat strike.”

They voted by 98 percent to authorize a strike on August 22 and have been holding informational pickets at Air Canada’s major airport hubs in Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg and Vancouver. “Air Canada pilots sent an overwhelming message that they are resolved and unified and willing to do what it takes to get the contract that they have earned,” Charlene Hudy, chair of the Air Canada ALPA Master Executive Council, told Global News after the overwhelming strike vote.

As a result of the now decade-long contract, Air Canada pilots earn approximately half of what pilots at the four largest US-based airlines do, and they have less favourable scheduling and pension plans. The pilots are seeking to dramatically improve their wages and working conditions, especially in the face of surging inflation over the last four years.

While Air Canada boasts that its pilots can earn up to \$350,000 plus expenses annually, this requires more than a decade of flying experience and costly certifications and licenses. Pilots are responsible for the lives of hundreds of passengers and crew every flight, and the job is notoriously stressful, with odd schedules that can take them away from their families for extended periods.

Air Canada is the largest airline based in the country by revenue and passenger volume. The companies saw a revenue of \$21.8 billion in 2023 out of which it took \$2.28 billion in profit. President and CEO Michael Rousseau received a total compensation of \$12.4 million in 2022.

During the height of travel restrictions implemented at the outset of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the Canadian government provided Air Canada with a bailout package of \$5.9 billion, out of which the company took around \$2 billion. The government currently holds a 6 percent stake in the company as a result.

New Democratic Party (NDP) leader Jagmeet Singh has declared that his party would vote against “back-to-work” legislation against striking Air Canada pilots. However, this is all but meaningless in the face of the increasing bureaucratic power that the Trudeau government has wielded through the CIRB, which does not require parliamentary approval.

While Singh has “ripped up” his party’s confidence-and-supply agreement with Trudeau’s Liberals for electoral purposes, he and the NDP remain firmly loyal to the union/NDP/Liberal alliance that has served as a key mechanism for the ruling class to suppress the class struggle for decades. Singh has refused to take any concrete steps which would threaten the minority government and pledged to fight the next election against “Conservative cuts,” i.e., on the basis of the bogus perspective that the Liberals represent a “progressive” alternative to the Tories. Singh and the NDP have helped keep the Liberals in power since 2019, as they have waged aggressive war abroad, run roughshod over workers’ rights, and imposed a forever-COVID policy which has resulted in

thousands of unnecessary deaths. This right-wing, anti-worker alliance has opened the way for the populist posturing of far-right Conservative leader Pierre Poilievre to gain a hearing among sections of workers.

Meanwhile, the NDP and the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) aim to keep workers straitjacketed within Canada’s pro-business “collective bargaining” system under which it is increasingly impossible for workers to take any “legal” action in the form of strikes, sickouts and slowdowns in the fight for better wages and working conditions. Amid decades of concessions enforced by the nationalist and corporatist unions in the name of saving “Canadian jobs,” the right to strike for workers in “essential” industries from the ports, to rail to the airlines is all but a dead letter.

There is immense potential for mobilizing airline workers across borders and employers. However, with 77,000 members in the United States and Canada, the ALPA—affiliated to both the AFL-CIO and the CLC—is keeping Canadian pilots divided from pilots in the US and others around the world.

Air Canada pilots, flight attendants, mechanics and other airline workers across industries and borders must wage a unified political struggle to confront the assault on their working conditions and wages, which is being imposed by the bosses with the full backing of the Canadian and US governments. Through the building of rank-and-file committees, pilots and airline workers can outline and fight for demands for what workers need, not what union bureaucrats or the CEOs say is possible. And they must turn to other sections of the working class who are entering into struggle, including the 33,000 Boeing airplane assembly workers in Washington and Oregon who overwhelmingly rejected a union-backed tentative agreement and went on strike Friday. This struggle must develop into a political battle against the class war agenda of imperialist war abroad and attacks on workers’ rights at home, which is the only way pilots and airline workers can secure their legitimate demands.

All those ready to fight for this perspective should fill out the form below for more information on how to build a rank-and-file committee.



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