

# As CUPE works to block all-out strike at Port of Montreal, Quebec City dockworkers' lockout enters third year

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Some 1,150 longshoremen at the Port of Montreal completed three days of strike action last week to demand better scheduling, an end to contracting out and the undermining of seniority, and job protections. The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), which is the workers' bargaining agent, is doing all it can to prevent an all-out strike, as shown by the announcement Monday that its next step will be to launch an indefinite overtime ban Thursday.

During last week's strike, which the union limited to three days in advance, CUPE did everything to keep the dockers isolated. It made no appeal for solidarity action with the 45,000 east coast dock workers in the United States, who struck for nearly three days at the same time as the Montreal workers before they were sold out by their union. Nor did it link the dockers' struggle with battles by other workers across Canada, including those represented by CUPE, who confront similar conditions.

The *World Socialist Web Site* urges dockworkers to take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands by forming rank-and-file committees, which would allow them to appeal to broader sections of the working class for support. The development of a mass political movement spearheaded by the dockers is necessary to defy government-backed attacks on working conditions, and the threat of back-to-work legislation, which was used in 2021 to criminalize a dock strike in Montreal.

CUPE is bitterly hostile to such a fight. Its determination to isolate workers from their class brothers and sisters until they can concoct a rotten deal with management that they can ram down the throats of their members is underscored by the fate of dockworkers in Quebec City, who have been locked out for over two years.

The lockout was imposed on the 81 longshoremen at the

Port of Quebec on September 15, 2022 by the Société des arrimeurs de Québec (SAQ), an employers' association representing the three employers operating at the Port of Quebec—G3 Canada Limited, QSL and Logistec.

Just before the lockout, Logistec (the only one of the three to be listed on the stock exchange and forced to publish its financial statements) recorded the best results in its 70-year history, with revenues of 743 million Canadian dollars (up 23 percent) and pre-tax profits of 120 million dollars.

In January 2024, Logistec was acquired for \$1.2 billion by US private equity firms Blue Wolf Capital Partners and Stonepeak, which together manage assets of nearly US\$60 billion.

When the lockout began, the Port of Quebec was one of Canada's top five ports in terms of cargo tonnage. A labor dispute had been looming since the collective agreement expired on May 31, 2022. Gruelling schedules and a decent work-life balance were the main issues facing workers, just as they are at the Port of Montreal.

Citing a difficult economic context and a labor shortage, the SAQ wants to impose 12-hour shifts.

A longshoreman's job is already notoriously dangerous and difficult. At the Port of Quebec, workers are assigned the day before their shift for the following day. They can also go several weeks without a weekend off. These conditions make planning family life virtually impossible, a situation that would be made much worse by longer shifts.

On August 30, 2022, the longshoremen voted 98.5 percent in favor of pressure tactics up to and including an indefinite strike. But CUPE, the largest union in Canada with over 700,000 members, sought instead to demobilize them by opting for limited pressure tactics, such as refusing overtime or slowing down operations.

Then, faced with the lockout and the employer's use of scabs, CUPE did everything it could to isolate the longshoremen from the rest of the working class. When dockers at British Columbia ports, members of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), went on strike in July 2023, for example, CUPE did nothing to link the two struggles.

Refusing to mobilize the active support of its hundreds of thousands of members, and of the working class more broadly, CUPE limited itself to futile calls for the adoption of anti-scab legislation by Justin Trudeau's federal Liberal government. The latter is a big-business government that has repeatedly passed strikebreaking legislation or deployed the arbitrary powers of the state apparatus in recent years—whether against postal workers, railway workers or Montreal longshoremen three years ago.

In November 2023, the Trudeau government tabled Bill C-58 in the Canadian Parliament to prohibit companies under federal jurisdiction from employing scabs. The law, which was passed on June 20, 2024, is designed to salvage the Trudeau government's "progressive" image, completely demolished by its attacks on the right to strike and its unwavering support for the Israeli genocide of the Palestinians.

The Liberal bill keeps the working class chained to the legal process of "collective bargaining" while guaranteeing the continued use of scabs and introducing new restrictions on the right to strike. For example, it authorizes the use of replacement workers if there are "threats to health and safety" or if a strike is likely to cause "serious damage to the environment or property." What's more, it won't come into force until June 2025, one year after its adoption.

Despite the fact that the new law is designed to legitimize the use of scabs, while placing additional barriers in the way of workers before they can strike, the Liberal bill has been enthusiastically welcomed by union organizations, which have described it as "historic," and by the Liberals' ally, the social-democratic NDP. The latter made the adoption of anti-scab legislation a condition of the deal it struck in March 2022 to keep the minority Liberal government in power.

It was only at the beginning of September this year that the NDP put an end to this agreement, fearing that its association with such a reactionary, anti-worker Liberal government would lead to a debacle in the next election. This came a week after the Liberals resorted to the powers of the unelected Canadian Industrial Relations Board to

ban a strike by 9,300 railway workers at the end of August.

The Port of Quebec longshoremen's union has welcomed Bill C-58 as an "essential step," while continuing to claim that scabs are the only reason for the persistence of the lockout, and that the law would have put an end to the labour dispute if it had come into force immediately.

In reality, if the SAQ is able to keep the longshoremen locked out, it's thanks to the collaboration of CUPE, whose role is consistent with that played by the entire union apparatus on the basis of its nationalist, pro-capitalist orientation.

In exchange for privileges for a handful of bureaucrats, the unions have for years acted as a police force in the workplace, imposing the attacks on wages and working conditions demanded by the financial oligarchy. This is not the first time CUPE has acted in this way, having sabotaged the struggle of the 1,200 longshoremen at the Port of Montreal in 2021.

Dockworkers across Canadian ports and beyond must learn the lessons of the Quebec City port lockout. For the locked-out Quebec City workers, the first step to break their isolation is to elect a rank-and-file strike committee, organized independently of CUPE and the entire union bureaucracy. The first task of this committee will be to establish contact with their brothers and sisters in the ports of Montreal and elsewhere in Canada, in order to mobilize the great objective power of longshoremen—who occupy a key position in vital supply chains—in a unified struggle for decent hours and improved working conditions.

This struggle must also be waged on an international scale, because the exploitative conditions faced by Quebec's longshoremen are reproduced not only in Canadian workplaces, but also in North American and European ports, and in transport and logistics industries the world over.



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