

The Role of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers in sabotaging postal workers' struggles: 2011-2024—Part 2

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This is the second part of a two-part article. Part one can be accessed here.

CUPW surrenders to the Trudeau Liberals' 2018 strikebreaking law

In 2018, when postal workers sought to fight back against years of concessions and an ever more punishing work regime, the big business Trudeau Liberal government responded just as the Harper Conservative government had seven years before, by criminalizing their strike and imposing binding arbitration. The Trudeau government's strikebreaking made a mockery of the CUPW bureaucracy's efforts to paint it as "progressive" and an ally of postal workers.

Despite all CUPW President Mike Palecek's "militant" bluster and "left" rhetoric, CUPW pursued in all its essentials—before during and after the 2018 strike—exactly the same ruinous strategy as the previous right-wing leadership had in 2011. All Palecek's talk of defying strikebreaking legislation amounted to nothing more than hot air. As the conflict with the Canada Post heated up in the fall of 2018, he and the CUPW leadership said nothing about the impending threat of a back-to-work law. Then when the strike was criminalized, they ordered postal workers to submit to the government's diktats.

Canada Post used the two-year "bridging" contract Palecek and the CUPW leadership foisted on them in 2016, on the claim they didn't want to disrupt public debate around the Liberals' postal task force, to significantly increase its exploitation of postal workers. In addition to the real wage cuts imposed in the contract, the privatization of postal offices, and the slashing of letter-carrier routes, it imposed a significant speed-up of its operations to cash in on the increase in parcel deliveries from e-commerce. Implementing new parcel sorting technology, Canada Post forced postal workers to work long and irregular hours delivering heavy packages in an effort to compete with private sector parcel-delivery giants like UPS and FedEx. This reckless speed-up resulted in a soaring accident rate—postal workers suffer disabling injuries more than five times the average in federally regulated industries, making work at Canada Post even more dangerous than mining or longshoring.

Postal workers were ready and willing to fight in order to protect themselves from the dangerous profit-driven demands of management, and to reverse the years of privatization, job cuts and wage suppression forced upon them since 2011. They delivered to Palecek and the CUPW an overwhelming strike mandate, with 93.8 percent of urban postal operations workers and 95.9 percent of rural and suburban mail carriers voting to strike.

The CUPW bureaucracy, however, did all it could to avoid a confrontation with Canada Post and their bosses in the Liberal government. Despite the massive strike vote, they refused to mobilize the full industrial power of the postal workers and call a national strike. Instead, after weeks of delay during which they appealed to Trudeau to appoint a mediator to assist with negotiations, the CUPW leadership adopted the same strategy of rotating one- or two-day regional walkouts as in 2011. Again, the explicit aim of this strategy was for workers' job action to be as ineffectual as possible. "Our aim," said Palecek, "is not to disrupt the public. It's not to disrupt the service that we provide, that we've been defending for years, so we're trying to come up with ways to put some pressure on Canada Post without impacting the public."

Palecek and the CUPW did everything they could to keep the postal workers' struggle in the channels of the collective bargaining system, despite the fact that Canada Post management was intransigent in their demands and could rely on the government to force postal workers back to work. They did nothing to appeal to any other sections of the working class, including those in the public sector, for a joint struggle to defend public services and the jobs and working conditions of the workers who administer them.

Deeply integrated by this point into their alliance with the Trudeau government, the CUPW and the CLC maintained a deafening silence on the threat of a Liberal strikebreaking law for weeks, until the government effectively announced it would criminalize the postal workers' campaign of rotating strikes if it wasn't immediately halted.

When he was eventually compelled to address the looming back-to-work law, Palecek pleaded with Trudeau: "We have a government that says they believe in collective bargaining. We hope their patience would match those principles."

To cover over the fact that the CUPW bureaucracy had done nothing to prepare workers to stand up to government strikebreaking, Palecek made much of the support that the CLC and its President Hassan Yussuff had promised to provide to postal workers in the event of strikebreaking legislation. Yussuff was such an intimate ally of Trudeau's government that the Liberal prime minister appointed him to a position in the Senate when he retired from the CLC two years later. In a joint press conference after the introduction of the back-to-work law in Parliament, Palecek and Yussuff continued to plead with the Trudeau government for assistance. "We are calling on the federal government to allow for a fair process by encouraging workers and the employer to come to an agreement that works for everyone," said Yussuff.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and Socialist Equality Party sought to clarify Palecek's role as part of their struggle for workers to take matters into their hands and fight to mobilize the entire working class against the state assault on workers' right to strike and bargain collectively. Under

the heading, “The working class must come to the defence of the Canada Post workers,” we wrote:

Led by Mike Palecek, a former member of the pseudo-left Fightback group, CUPW portrays itself as one of Canada’s most militant unions. In winning election as union president in 2015, Palecek demagogically appealed to rank-and-file anger over the previous leadership’s capitulation before the Harper Conservative government’s 2011 back-to-work law and subsequent acceptance of sweeping concessions, including pension cuts and a further expansion of multi-tier and temporary employment.

Last summer postal workers voted overwhelmingly in favour of a national strike. But CUPW refused to act on this mandate, calling an ineffectual campaign of rotating strikes instead. Even after Trudeau signaled that his government was preparing back-to-work legislation, Palecek and CUPW continued to breathe not a word about the threat of government intervention.

When Palecek finally addressed the issue of back-to-work legislation, he did so alongside Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) President Hassan Yussuff, whom he touted as an ally of postal workers in opposing Trudeau and his strikebreaking law. In fact, the CLC has time and again connived with governments to smother working class opposition and torpedo strikes, while providing explicit support to Liberal, NDP and PQ governments that have imposed austerity.

The CUPW and the CLC, notwithstanding Palecek’s touting of the tremendous support that Canada’s largest union federation could give postal workers, never once raised the possibility of defying the Trudeau government’s strikebreaking legislation. Instead, just like in 2011, the CUPW leadership rolled over and surrendered completely, ordering the postal workers to obey the strike ban and go back to work.

Humiliated, Palecek promoted the illusion that the legislation could be disputed in the courts. The union’s challenge of the Harper government’s 2011 strikebreaking law took five years to reach a verdict, with the court ruling that the law was, in fact, unconstitutional. Predictably enough, this ruling had no impact on the major attacks enforced on the workers under the illegal strike ban. The court left in place all of the sweeping concessions Canada Post imposed in the wake of the breaking of the strike.

To provide CUPW with some cover for its abject surrender to the Liberals’ back-to-work law and abandonment of postal workers’ demands, the CLC subsequently organized a series of sparsely attended “community pickets.” When several of these “community pickets” briefly disrupted the entry and exit of mail delivery trucks at postal sorting plants, Canada Post responded by obtaining court injunctions which prohibited anyone from obstructing or preventing vehicles or persons from entering or exiting its facilities. They slandered picketers in Halifax who had been arrested as a “serious threat to public safety.”

In this bitter defeat for the postal workers and the working class as a whole, the role of Palecek and the kind of “left” trade union bureaucrat he typifies was laid bare. As the right-wing trade union bureaucracy moved to integrate itself even deeper into a corporatist alliance with the state and the employer, exemplified by its alliance with the Trudeau Liberals, it relied upon “militants” like Palecek to corral working class anger back into the dead end of the “collective bargaining” system and prevent workers from launching a political fight against capitalist austerity and war. In channelling radicalized workers and youth behind such trade union “militants,” pseudo-left groups like the former Fightback (now rebranded as the Revolutionary Communist Party) play a particularly crucial role.

Palecek adopted the same bankrupt strategy as the CUPW leadership in 2011 because he was committed to the same pro-capitalist collective bargaining framework, upon which the privileges of the trade union bureaucracy depend. They were deeply hostile to the mobilization of the postal workers because they feared it could ignite a broader working class struggle that would rapidly escape their control and become a direct challenge to the Liberal government they were in bed with.

In a statement issued on the WSWS after the Liberals introduced their strikebreaking legislation, which was distributed to striking postal workers, the SEP fought to clarify these issues and advance an independent political strategy:

If Canada Post workers are to achieve their entirely justified demands, they must break politically and organizationally from CUPW and take their struggle into their own hands. Rank-and-file committees must be established in every sorting centre, post office and storage facility to organize an all-out nationwide strike and mobilize support from the entire working class.

In this fight, postal workers will confront the full force of the state and Canada Post management, and the complicity and duplicity of the union bureaucracy. But their allies, the Canadian and international working class, represent a much more powerful social force.

CUPW backs the ruling elite’s “profits before life” pandemic policy

After banning the 2018 strike, the Liberal government appointed an arbitrator to dictate the terms of the postal workers’ new contract. Trudeau chose Anne MacPherson, the former chair of the Canada Industrial Relations Board (CIRB). Named by the previous Harper Conservative government in 2011 to arbitrate a dispute between Air Canada and its 6,800 flight attendants, MacPherson imposed a concessionary contract on the workers they had twice rejected. Wrangling between Canada Post, CUPW and MacPherson at the bargaining table dragged on until postal workers had laboured for two years without a new contract.

Meanwhile, the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic swept across the world in early 2020, with the highly communicable virus spreading rapidly and causing mass illness and death. Under pressure from wildcat working class actions to shut down inessential production that spring, governments around the world put into place temporary lockdowns and other public health measures to control the spread of the virus. To offset the massive economic shock caused by the pandemic to big business in Canada, the Trudeau government bailed out the banks and major corporations to the tune of \$650 billion and flooded the financial markets with cheap credit. By May, the ruling classes in Canada and around the world were ruthlessly imposing a mass return to work and the systematic dismantling of public health measures standing in the way of their profits, regardless of the health consequences for the working population.

Postal workers valiantly risked their health throughout repeated waves of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly as the volume of parcels grew sharply during the initial lock downs. It was during the ruling class’ drive to reopen the economy that MacPherson finally imposed a concession-filled two-year contract on the postal workers, using her powers under the Liberal strike breaking law. The contract enshrined, among other rollbacks, wage raises that fell far below the rate of inflation that was soon to skyrocket, in what amounted to a massive real wage cut that postal workers are still living with today.

The CUPW acquiesced to the mediator's dictates, enforcing the terms of the new collective agreement even while postal workers around the country contracted COVID-19 on the job. In doing so, they joined with the CLC, Unifor, and the other major trade union bureaucracies in Canada as they worked with the state and big business to enforce the return to work in the spring of 2020 and the "Profits Over Life" policy that has led to millions of deaths and untold millions more cases of Long Covid around the world.

The WSWS and the SEP fought to mobilize workers for a science-based policy to end the pandemic and save lives, writing at the time that:

Working people must reject all efforts by the ruling class to bully them back to work amid a raging pandemic. They must intervene with their own independent program to protect lives and working people's livelihoods—a program that begins with social needs, not what the capitalists claim they can afford. This program should include the rollout of mass testing, contact tracing, and quarantining to contain the virus; the shutting down of all nonessential industries with full pay for all workers affected; the provision of masks, gloves, and other personal protective equipment to medical staff and other essential workers; and the investment of billions in the health care system to provide the best possible care to those infected by the virus.

To fight for these demands, workers must create committees of action in their workplaces and neighbourhoods, independent of and in opposition to the trade unions and NDP, which for decades have suppressed the class struggle and are now aiding the ruling elite in dragooning workers back on the job.

None of these demands can be achieved under capitalism. The financial oligarchy that constitutes the core of the ruling class and to whom the politicians are beholden deems all money spent on workers' livelihoods and social services to be a drain on its profits. Workers must wage a political struggle in alliance with their class brothers and sisters internationally to bring to power workers' governments committed to socialist policies, so that society's abundant resources can be redeployed to protect human life and workers' livelihoods, rather than augmenting private profit and death.

The contracts imposed by MacPherson expired for rural and suburban mail carriers (RSMCs) on December 31, 2021, and for urban postal operations (UPO) workers on January 31, 2022. Amid a second winter of mass infection and death produced by the ruling elite's homicidal pandemic policy, postal workers would have enjoyed broad support for a struggle to overturn concessions and achieve real gains. They were widely seen in the working class as one of the sections of the workforce that had been most directly exposed to the dangers of the pandemic, which would have generated strong sympathy for their demands.

Precisely because of this fact, CUPW intervened to short-circuit any prospect of a strike. Behind the backs of its members, the CUPW bureaucracy unilaterally agreed to extend both contracts by two years. Nearly three years on from this outrageous act of sabotage, postal workers have been kept on the job without a new contract for over nine months in the case of RSMCs and over eight months for UPO workers.

A review of CUPW's record demonstrates that far from championing workers' interests and mobilizing their social power, the union bureaucracy has systematically sought to demobilize them. Over and over, the CUPW bureaucracy claims that it has been forced to accept concessions because the postal workers aren't "ready to fight." But whenever postal workers have tried to launch a serious struggle, they have been politically muzzled by the CUPW bureaucracy, which works overtime to prevent a direct clash between the workers and government. The union leadership invariably refuses to mobilize other sections of workers to back the postal workers, isolates their struggle, and surrenders to the demands of management and the state.

This has been key to CUPW's collusion with management in enforcing round after round of concessions. Moreover, this is true whether the union apparatus is led by a career bureaucrat or a left-talking, purported "militant" like Mike Palecek. Alongside the CLC and trade union bureaucracy as a whole, they have remained committed to their alliance with the Liberals and the state-regulated, pro-employer collective bargaining system. Defenders of capitalism, which is the source of their privileges, the union bureaucracy accepts that Canada Post must be run as a corporate enterprise, not a public service, and that postal workers' jobs, wages and working conditions must be subordinated to capitalist profit.

Postal workers in Canada took an important step forward this summer, when they formed the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee (Canada), to mobilize in a political struggle against the corporatist partnership between CUPW, corporate management, and the Liberal government. Against this pro-capitalist tripartite alliance, which has no solution to the rapidly escalating crisis of bourgeois society but poverty, misery and war, the PWRFC seeks to bring to bear the only power that can challenge the ruling class—a political counteroffensive led by the working class against the ruling elite's class war agenda:

We face powerful enemies in our struggle, but our potential allies are even stronger. By building the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee, we are appealing to the working class in logistics and other economic sectors across Canada, as well as postal workers and the working class as a whole internationally, to join our fight. We say that there is no way forward within the suffocating, state-sponsored "collective bargaining" system. Rather, we can only counter the looming threat of strikebreaking legislation by making our struggle the starting point for a worker-led counteroffensive against capitalist austerity and war.

While the CUPW bureaucracy confines our struggles to the framework of the nation-state, Canada Post management operates, takes its business decisions, and introduces new procedures on the basis of a globalized economy. We must adapt to the global character of the logistics industry by advancing our own global strategy to unite our struggles and bring postal and delivery operations under workers' control.

Having just delivered another resounding strike vote, the urgent task before postal workers is to join and build the PWRFC in opposition to the CUPW bureaucracy so that they have an organization capable of countermanding the order from the bureaucracy to surrender to management's demands that will come sooner rather than later.

To get involved with the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee, fill out the form below.

Build the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee (Canada)



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact