

Battle lines harden with strike by 55,000 Canada Post workers in 3rd week

Our reporters
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The Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee (Canada) will be holding an online public meeting Sunday, December 8, at 1 p.m. Eastern Time: The Canada Post Strike at the Crossroads. Register here to participate.

Are you a striking postal worker? We want to hear about the issues you're fighting for and how you think you can win your struggle. Email us at canadapostworkersrfc@gmail.com or fill out the form at the end of this article. All comments will be kept anonymous.

The strike by 55,000 postal workers at Canada Post is now well into its third week. With the backing of the Trudeau Liberal government, management at the Crown corporation continues to make demands for sweeping concessions, while the leaderships of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) and Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) work tirelessly to keep striking postal workers isolated from their colleagues throughout the logistics sector and the working class as a whole.

Labour Minister Steven MacKinnon announced the breakdown of mediation last week, claiming that the sides were too far apart for an agreement to be reached. Canada Post presented a new “comprehensive framework” for restarting talks to CUPW Sunday, which CUPW described as producing “some progress.” A Monday bargaining update to postal workers declared, however, “Overall, the framework still remains far from something members could ratify. The Corporation remains uncompromising on many of its most severe demands for what it calls ‘flexibility’—a Canada Post plan which, if implemented, will come at the expense of workers.”

This amounts to a warning from CUPW about the explosive opposition among rank-and-file postal workers to the restructuring of Canada Post operations under discussion between management and its union “partners.” The CUPW bargaining team is effectively admitting that, even if it agrees to steps to “Amazonnify” Canada Post, it doubts its ability to convince its members to support an agreement in a ratification vote. As the update continued, “The union is prepared to return to the bargaining table. We’re waiting to be called back by the mediator.”

CUPW’s total subservience to the government-appointed mediator underscores its complicity in the attacks being prepared on its members. The government did not intervene in bargaining, which has been ongoing for more than a year, as an “honest broker” trying to achieve a “compromise.” Rather, its role is to

reinforce the savage concession demands made by the Crown corporation so as to make an example of the postal workers that will facilitate the intensified destruction of public services and worker rights across the board. The Trudeau government’s goal, as shown by its policies over the past nine years, is to subordinate all of society’s resources to waging Canadian imperialism’s wars around the world and enriching the wealthy at the expense of everyone else.

Anyone who doubts this fact only needs to look at the fate of the rail workers’ strike in August, and the port workers’ lockouts in Montreal and Vancouver in early November to recognize that the government acts always to impose the demands of big business. On both occasions, MacKinnon invoked a new interpretation of Section 107 of the Canada Labour Code to arrogate sweeping, effectively dictatorial powers, and implement a draconian ban on strike action. This section of the Code allows the Labour Minister to order the unelected Canadian Industrial Relations Board to carry out any action he deems necessary to end a labour dispute.

Through the arbitrary powers extended to the Canadian Industrial Relations Board, a corporatist body on which long-time union officials and employer representatives sit, MacKinnon helped create the conditions for an arbitrator to maintain ruthless regimes of overwork, unpredictable scheduling, and wages that fail to keep pace with inflation on the railways and docks. He is increasingly likely to take this route again with the postal workers as the peak of the Christmas season mail period approaches.

If MacKinnon has yet to resort to Section 107 in the latest dispute, it is because significant sections of the ruling class are happy to let the dispute drag out, provided CUPW maintains its stranglehold over the postal workers’ struggle and keeps the strike isolated. Many companies have rerouted packages via Canada Post subsidiary Purolator, a process aided by the inaction of the Teamsters union bureaucracy to enforce its empty November 15 assertion that Purolator workers would show their “solidarity” with the Canada Post strike by not handling extra parcels. The impact of the shift of substantial amounts of commercial mail and delivery services to low-wage firms like Purolator, who have vastly inferior benefits, job security, and worker rights, will be to intensify the pressure on Canada Post workers to accept similar conditions in order to make the Crown corporation “viable.” Given that CUPW has repeatedly stated its commitment to run Canada Post as a profit-making enterprise, there is no reason to doubt that it will play a key role in this process.

The ruling elite's readiness to let "market forces" do its dirty work, with a helping hand from the union bureaucracy, would rapidly shift if postal workers develop an orientation to other delivery workers and broaden their struggle to other sections of the working class.

The explosive social situation in Canada, where income inequality is at its highest level on record and vast swathes of the population struggle to make ends meet, creates favourable conditions for such a movement to develop rapidly and assume an anti-austerity character. However, the political mobilization of the working class behind the postal workers, which is the only way that workers can defy the threat of government intervention to impose corporate concessions, requires a clear political perspective that rejects the domination of social life by corporate profit and the subordination of society's resources to the waging of imperialist wars around the world. This means taking up the fight for socialism.

Canada Post workers established the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee in June to seize control of their contract struggle from the corporatist CUPW bureaucracy and fight for what workers actually need, not what the company claims is affordable. The PWRFC has adopted resolutions declaring its support for the broadening of the Canada Post strike to workers throughout the logistics sector and beyond, and calling for a political struggle against the union-backed Liberal government to defy a government-imposed strike ban, however it may be enforced.

Striking postal workers in Montreal, speaking to *World Socialist Web Site* reporters about the PWRFC's program, emphasized their strong support for a broader struggle. Jan, a worker with 20 years at Canada Post, said, "There's a lot of tension, there's a lot of questioning about capitalism. At one point a certain amount of freedom and so on is fine. But when you have one class which is getting richer and richer and you have the rest of the people which are getting poorer and poorer, people are going to start getting upset."

Jerome agreed, stating, "It's certain that if the employer pays us a dollar an hour less, it's a dollar more in their pocket, and it directly affects profitability. The less they offer us, the higher their profit margin. You don't want to level down: in a society when workers stand up to protect their rights, protect what they have, I think everyone wins."

Jan remarked on the disastrous consequences for residents of running Canada Post as a profit-making concern like Purolator, UPS or DHL:

There are similar problems in any place where the government talks about privatizing the post office or cutting back its services. The only reason Canada Post is losing money right now is because it's a service designed to provide mail and parcel delivery everywhere in Canada. You can go to the largest city or the smallest town, and Canada Post will deliver.

I've been all across Canada, visiting post offices everywhere, and everyone can get their parcels delivered by Canada Post. Can they get them delivered by FedEx?

No. Can they get them delivered by Purolator, UPS or DHL? No. All those companies rely on Canada Post to deliver parcels to small towns. They send us their parcels to complete the delivery because they don't provide service in those areas. They're only interested in profits and focus on big cities like Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal.

Everywhere else, it's Canada Post providing the service—even if it loses money. If you want to send a letter to Whitehorse in the Yukon, it costs you \$1.15 with Canada Post. With FedEx, the same letter costs over \$16.

Jerome commented along similar lines,

Companies like UPS will seek their profitability by serving only urban areas. They don't go to the regions. Canada Post is, above all, a company that offers a service to the population. It's a service company. In the past, as in 2006-2007, they paid dividends to the government of \$250 million per year, or half a billion in two years. I think it's a company that is here to offer a service first.

Addressing one of the major concerns for workers, Jan added,

Every time there are negotiations and a new contract is coming up, it's the same story: management tries to cut and reduce benefits. They're slashing pensions. Right now, we have what's called a defined benefit program for pensions, where if you work a certain number of years, you're guaranteed a certain percentage of your salary.

For example, if you work at Canada Post full-time for 35 years and contribute to the pension for 35 years, you can receive up to 70% of your salary as a pension when you retire.

What they want to change is that new workers won't get a guaranteed pension. Instead, they want to move to a defined contribution plan, where they pay a set amount into your plan. But if the stock market goes down and the fund's value drops, that's just too bad for you. People won't know if they'll have enough money to retire or not.

We encourage all striking postal workers to get involved in the PWRFC. We can be contacted at canadapostworkersrfc@gmail.com.



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