

Canada Post strike at the crossroads: Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee holds well-attended public meeting

Our reporters
10 December 2024

We encourage all striking postal workers to contact the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee at canadapostworkersffc@gmail.com or by filling out the form at the end of this article.

The Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee held its second public meeting Sunday, entitled, “The Canada Post Strike at the Crossroads.” Speakers called for strikers to seize control of their struggle from the hands of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers’ (CUPW) bureaucracy and appeal for support from broader sections of workers to make it the spearhead of a working-class counteroffensive against capitalist austerity across Canada and internationally.

The meeting was attended by striking Canada Post workers, as well as postal workers from the United States and Britain. The meeting received greetings from other sections of the working class in Canada, including healthcare workers, and education workers from Ontario and Quebec.

The meeting took place as the strike continued into its fourth week, with Canada Post management, backed by corporate Canada and aided by the CUPW bureaucracy, intensifying its push to impose a sweeping restructuring plan. In its latest offer to Canada Post, the CUPW has made major concessions, including reducing its wage demand to a miserly 19 percent over four years from an initial demand for 22 percent.

Opening the meeting as chair, Roger Jordan, a member of the Socialist Equality Party (Canada), observed, “There are two potential ways forward for the struggle to develop. If it remains under the control of the CUPW bureaucracy, in one way or another, Canada Post management is going to succeed in imposing a defeat on the strikers. However, the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee insists that if rank-and-file workers take the conduct of this strike into their own hands and appeal for support more broadly in the working class, there is a real basis for the strikers to beat back the demands of Canada Post, which are supported by all of corporate Canada. This is because ultimately the support that they could win within the working class is much stronger than the power of big business.”

Daniel Berkley, a postal worker from Ontario and a leading member of the PWRFC, stressed in his introductory report that strikers must break out of the “collective bargaining” straitjacket imposed by CUPW. He urged postal workers to fight to mobilize workers throughout the transportation, logistics, and other sectors to join their fight:

Above all, we face a political struggle, not one of collective bargaining. Postal workers will find strong support among broad layers of workers, if and when we position ourselves as the spearhead for a worker-led counteroffensive against brutal exploitation and austerity, and to defend public services. We have seen waves of strikes and protests across Canada. Rail and dock workers voted overwhelmingly to reject union-negotiated, and

union-endorsed collective agreements, but these workers were undemocratically forced back to work by Labour Minister Steven MacKinnon. MacKinnon relied on the respective union bureaucracies to enforce his mandate.

Canada Post Corporation is attempting to impose brutal concessions on the workforce, including paltry wage increases below inflation, amounting to a real wage cut, and the casualization of employment with “gig work.” Technology such as “dynamic routing,” which has the potential to reduce workloads with no loss of pay for postal workers, is being used in the hands of the corporate bosses to rob postal workers of their own routes. All of these attacks are designed to make the Corporation “profitable” at the workers’ expense, Berkley explained.

Berkley continued,

Canada Post has claimed losses of \$3 billion since 2018. That includes heavy investments in new sorting plants and productivity-enhancing technologies. Now let’s put that \$3 billion into perspective. The world’s richest man, Elon Musk, is estimated to be personally worth over 100 times Canada Post’s stated loss. The Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB) announced two weeks ago that they will be rebating corporations to the tune of \$2 billion, a practice that started in 2021. Simply stated, the WSIB will be returning a surplus that they managed to withhold from injured workers. Financial assistance to the far-right Ukrainian government from the Trudeau government since the US/NATO-provoked Russian invasion of Ukraine stands at \$12.4 billion. Corporate tax avoidance by the largest 123 corporations operating in Canada for just the year 2021 stands at \$30 billion. Society has the resources for fully-funded public services, but those resources are being funneled to obscenely wealthy individuals and corporations.

Will Lehman from Mack Trucks in Macungie, Pennsylvania, who ran as a socialist rank-and-file worker for the leadership of the United Auto Workers (UAW) in 2022, addressed the meeting:

There’s broad anger about how the government is not representing the workers, but not a lot of understanding of how the capitalist system works in every country, and I think what the rank-and-file committee here has done in elaborating that is excellent.

The US has spent something around \$175 billion in military aid for Ukraine, and it's massively hated by the workers in the US that all this money is going essentially to murder people in another country when there's mass austerity at home. So, just speaking to the ability for our rank-and-file committees to make inroads, wherever we're reaching out to other workers in other sectors, it's going to be increasingly a time where we're received more warmly.

Geraldine, a retired mail carrier from California, commented,

This is the way capitalism works. We do the work. We sell our labor to the bosses. They refuse to pay us what it costs to keep up with inflation. So we refuse to work. We can't give them the right to refuse to pay us a fair wage, to make them rich.

Other postal workers who spoke pointed to serious safety problems raised by deliveries during the hours of darkness. One worker explained that after she had raised the issues of driving in the dark while trying to read mail addresses, and trying to find one's way from the vehicle to delivery addresses in the dark, she was told to keep quiet.

Stacey, a unionized nurse, noted how the Trudeau Liberal government legislated dockworkers in Montreal and Vancouver back to work just days before the postal workers walked off the job. "Clearly, they don't like having multiple groups of workers on strike all at once," she said. "Please strike for the nurses too, because 43 plus years and we're still not allowed to strike. Something really needs to change."

Tony Robson brought greetings to the meeting from the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee in Britain, focusing on the political lessons to be drawn by workers following the privatization of Royal Mail. "None of the issues postal workers confront are of a national character, whether it be automation to enforce mass job cuts, the use of intrusive technology to drive up critical workloads or increased demands for gig economy terms and conditions for a multi-tiered workforce," he said. "In Canada, this takes the form of prioritizing the public services exclusively for profits."

He stressed the need for a political and organizational break from the union apparatuses:

The struggle cannot be entrusted to the union bureaucracy. I think in particular in relation to how the union bureaucracy is seeking to keep it tied to the collective bargaining framework, I want to emphasize that this was used in the Royal Mail dispute to completely override the will of the rank and file. Postal workers launched 18 days of national strike action between August and December 2022.

This was after Royal Mail imposed a 2 percent pay award. This was under conditions when inflation was at 12 percent and they were demanding the tearing up of contracts to establish Amazon-style terms and conditions. This developed within the context of the 2022-2023 strike wave in Britain, which encompassed up to 2 million workers in every key sector, including the railways, docks, the national health service and public education.

The role of the CWU [Communication Workers Union] left-talking leadership under Dave Ward and the rest of the union bureaucracy was to keep these struggles regimentally divided and lined up behind the support for an election of a Labour government under the arch right-winger Sir Keir Starmer.

Others present at the meeting noted that this was exactly the pattern set by the former "left-talking" head of CUPW Mike Palecek, who campaigned to elect Trudeau in 2015 and capitulated to back-to-work legislation in 2018.

Keith Jones, the National Secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (Canada), addressed the Trudeau government's key role in helping Canada Post break the strike:

Traditionally, the government has used strike-breaking laws passed through Parliament, and these have been used repeatedly against postal workers, including to criminalize strikes in 2011 and in 2018. In both those years, the CUPW claimed that if they held workers essentially on a leash, if they only called rotating strikes, that they could avoid the threat of a government intervention.

In fact, this only emboldened the government, and under Harper in 2011 and then Trudeau in 2018, strikes of postal workers were criminalized and sent to an arbitrator, who was given the power to dictate the demands of the government and Canada Post management. Now they are dispensing with even the trouble of having to go through Parliament to get a fig leaf of democratic legitimacy for breaking strikes. The Labour Minister simply issues an order under section 107 of the Canada Labour Code to the Canadian Industrial Relations Board, which then issues a ruling that has the weight of law to illegalize worker job action.

Jones pointed to a second anti-worker strategy under consideration, which is to let the strike drag on, thereby further undermining Canada Post's market share and benefitting low-cost couriers who employ workers on far worse terms. He emphasized that both strategies are predicated on CUPW and the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) isolating the postal workers from their class brothers and sisters:

Central to the work of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees is the understanding that to defeat the transnational corporations and the capitalist governments, workers have to unite and coordinate their struggles internationally, developing a common strategy.

Workers are straining to fight. The Canada Post strike is part of a developing strike wave that has swept across Canada since 2021, with workers in every sector, public and private, fighting for inflation-busting wage increases to put an end to decades of concessions. Just in 2023, there were well over 5 million work days lost to strikes.

The ruling class assault on our democratic and social rights can only be defeated through the independent political mobilization of the working class. I say political because workers in Canada and around the world, when they oppose wage cuts, the dismantling of public services, and the diversion of massive resources to war, are fighting not just against an individual employer but against the government and the entire state apparatus, which exists to enforce the interests of big business.



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