

Unelected Canada Industrial Relations Board orders postal workers back to work from Tuesday

Roger Jordan
16 December 2024

Acting at the behest of the Trudeau Liberal government, the Canada Industrial Relations Board (CIRB) announced late Sunday that it was illegalizing the more than four-week-long strike that 55,000 postal workers have waged against the federal government-owned Canada Post.

In what amounts to a major attack on the rights of the entire working class, the CIRB ordered postal workers to return to work Tuesday with none of their demands having been met.

Postal workers must defy this anti-democratic edict, but this requires the mobilization of the broadest sections of the working class—public and private sector alike—across Canada and internationally. A political showdown is developing between corporate Canada and their representatives in parliament, who are all hell-bent on smashing the postal workers' struggle to set the stage for the evisceration of all public services and worker rights, and the working class, whose social interests can only be defended through an industrial and political mobilization against capitalist austerity and war.

Last Friday, Labour Minister Steven MacKinnon invoked the government's newly cooked-up "reinterpretation" of Section 107 of the Canada Labour Code to order the CIRB to criminalize the postal workers' strike. This is the third time in four months that MacKinnon has used Section 107 and the unelected CIRB to abrogate workers' supposedly constitutionally protected right to strike.

Unlike the previous two occasions, where MacKinnon explicitly ordered the CIRB to end strikes/lockouts involving rail workers across the country, and port workers in British Columbia and Quebec, in the case of the postal workers he ordered the CIRB to outlaw the strike and extend the postal workers' expired collective agreements until late May, if they determined contract negotiations were at an "impasse"—a foregone conclusion.

Opposition to the government's draconian intervention is boiling on picket lines across the country. Even bourgeois media outlets have been compelled to note widespread support for defiance of the CIRB's order. Speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site*, a striking postal worker summed up the sentiment at his Quebec local, "We have no rights, we have no right to strike. What we wanted to do was to go at the same time as the dockers and railroaders."

The CUPW apparatus is working might and main to smother this opposition so that no organized repudiation of the CIRB order takes place. A pathetic CUPW statement Monday bemoaned the CIRB's decision as "disappointing to say the least." It touted a 5 percent interim wage increase, agreed to as part of the CIRB's deliberations, that is retroactive to when the contracts of urban postal operations and rural and suburban mail carriers expired a year ago. This amounts to nothing more than a bribe to keep workers quiet, while the union bureaucracy focuses on implementing the CIRB's edict that all Canada Post employees restart

work at 8 a.m. local time Tuesday. To underscore this point, CUPW boasted that Canada Post would pay the miserly sum of \$1,000 of this retroactive pay raise by December 24, exploiting the upcoming holiday season to browbeat workers into playing ball.

Beyond that, all that the CUPW bureaucrats could muster was a pledge to "challenge" the CIRB's decision at hearings scheduled for January 13 and 14. There were no calls for defiance, no appeals for support from other workers, and no perspective for taking the postal workers' struggle forward. According to CUPW, postal workers must simply accept that their right to strike is snatched from them at a point where they are in an incredibly strong position amid heightened mail volumes during the holiday season.

The reality is objective conditions could hardly be more propitious for postal workers to defy the strike ban and rally mass working class support. The issues at the centre of the postal workers' struggle are of burning importance to all working people—the defence of public services; workers' control over the introduction of new technologies; an end to concessions and multi-tier workforces; and the defence of the right to strike.

The Trudeau government is deeply discredited, its "progressive" pretensions have been shown to be an utter fraud; widely hated for its indifference to working class socioeconomic distress; and torn by divisions as the class warfare intensifies.

Just hours after the CIRB's decision was released, Finance Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland announced her resignation from the government, and on the very day that she was slated to present its fall fiscal update. To much applause from big business, she attacked Trudeau from the right, arguing the government should be focussing on austerity, not "political gimmicks," that is, token measures to alleviate the cost-of-living crisis.

The ruling class drive to "Amazonify" the postal service

MacKinnon and the corporate-controlled media have universally presented the five-month strike ban as a "time-out." It is nothing of the sort. While workers are being prevented from employing their most basic method of struggle, the strike, representatives of Canada Post management, working in tandem with their accomplices in the CUPW bureaucracy and government officials, will continue working to craft a sweeping restructuring of Canada Post operations at workers' expense.

This is the significance of MacKinnon's establishment of an "Industrial Inquiry Commission" to consider the future of the postal service, which the ruling elite wants to organize along the lines of low-wage operations

like Amazon and other private parcel delivery services. Big business, the Liberal government and all the parties of the capitalist establishment see this as setting a precedent for sweeping attacks of a similar character across all public services.

Corporate consultants and advisers have openly discussed eliminating over 20,000 full-time jobs at the Crown corporation, which currently has a full-time workforce of just over 40,000. They want to replace them with precariously employed, permanent part-time or temporary gig workers who have no rights and earn poverty wages.

Postal workers have been chosen as a target for this fundamental restructuring because the ruling elite views them as one of the most militant sections of the working class, one that played an important role in achieving some of the social rights that the ruling class is no longer prepared to accept. As an article in the right-wing *Financial Post* explained this bluntly last month, citing a pro-corporate study on how to reorganize the postal service, “In the 26 years” between 1965 and 1991, “postal workers went on strike 12 times. As unions consolidated, they also gained new powers to resist Canada Post’s attempts to improve operations. Among the union gains ‘at the expense of Canada Post and Canadian consumers,’ the most significant benefit was that ‘all unionized employees have job security: they cannot be laid off.’”

The article carried as its title the ominous question, “Is this the last strike?”

The unions’ role in the restructuring of class relations

As Canadian imperialism embarks on a policy of world war, in close alliance with its decades-long geostrategic partner, American imperialism, to secure key resources, control over production chains and strategic territories, it is no longer prepared to invest funds in full-time jobs with benefits for postal workers or, for that matter, workers in any sector. Its political and corporate representatives want to subordinate all of society’s vast resources to the rearmament of the military, the waging of war against Russia and China, and the expansion of the super-rich’s already massive quantities of wealth. They have already gone a considerable way in enforcing this class war agenda, with Statistics Canada figures showing that income inequality at the end of 2023 was at its highest level on record. But if they succeed in defeating the postal workers, one can be sure that discussions about the “problem” of job security and other “excessive” rights and benefits among teachers, autoworkers, healthcare staff, transport workers, and others will soon permeate the pages of the corporate press.

The scope of the restructuring of social relations that the ruling class wants to impose is incompatible with democratic forms of rule. The Trudeau government’s resort to executive fiat to outlaw strikes is just one expression of the Canadian ruling class’ turn to authoritarian forms of rule. Others include Trudeau’s invocation of the draconian Emergencies Act and his government’s increased reliance on secret “orders in council” to adopt new laws, the normalization of the “notwithstanding clause” to abrogate constitutionally protected rights and the adoption of the far-right’s anti-immigrant agitation.

The entire union bureaucracy has colluded in the dramatic rightward shift of Canadian politics. The Canadian Labour Congress and the union-sponsored NDP have propped up the minority Trudeau government for the past five years.

Their response to Trudeau’s arrogation of new strikebreaking powers has been to enforce the government/CIRB’s patently illegal orders. It took the CLC three full days to issue a press release on the state assault on the postal workers, and then its response was to plead for closer collaboration

with the Trudeau government in suppressing the class struggle. It urged Trudeau to “consult with unions and workers about the misuse of Section 107,” and sought to justify its craven support for a government that is trampling on workers’ rights, imposing austerity and integrating Canada ever more fully in Washington’s global war by invoking the threat of a far-right Conservative government under Pierre Poilievre.

In fact, it is the unions and NDP’s systematic suppression of the class struggle—exemplified by their support for the Trudeau government—that is paving the way for the ruling class to replace it with an even more rapaciously anti-working class government, led by Poilievre, who was catapulted into the Tory leadership after emerging as the most strident supporter of the fascist-instigated “Freedom Convoy.” Like the would-be fascist dictator Trump, Poilievre is able to make a demagogic appeal to working class distress because the unions and the so-called parties of “left” are identified with austerity and war.

In its belated press release on the suppression of the postal workers’ strike, the CLC lamented, “Undermining collective bargaining undermines democracy itself.”

What hogwash! Canada’s state-designed, pro-employer “collective bargaining” system is a fraud. It is a mechanism for regulating and suppressing the class struggle. Over the past four decades, governments of every stripe have routinely criminalized strikes, while the unions developed a corporatist alliance with big business and the state that has served as the mechanism for imposing concessions and job cuts in every economic sphere.

Postal workers must defy the CIRB’s back-to-work order if they are to realize their justified demands for real wage increases, job security, and decent benefits. But this stand will only succeed if postal workers appeal to the entire working class for support. A political break from the suffocating grip of the union/NDP/Liberal alliance is required. For decades it has been deployed to keep workers straitjacketed within the “collective bargaining” system so each struggle can more easily be sold out and no working class challenge to the broader austerity agenda of the ruling class mounted.

To prosecute this struggle new forms of organization, rank-and-file committees controlled by workers on the shop floor, like the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee, must be built. These organizations provide the mechanism for workers to assert their will against that of the union bureaucrats, who always want to uphold the “legality” of corporate Canada and its state. These committees must develop a political struggle drawing in workers throughout the transportation, logistics, and all other economic sectors to fight for the bringing down of the Trudeau government and the transfer of political power to the working class.

This must be coupled with a sustained struggle for the development of a socialist vanguard in the working class, led by the Socialist Equality Party, that will spearhead the struggle for a workers’ government dedicated to placing the vast resources of society under the control of the working class so that the postal service and all public services are prioritized over the accumulation of private profit and the waging of war.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact