

Government-imposed strike ban at Canada Post: The way forward in struggle against austerity and war

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Some 55,000 postal workers returned to work Tuesday after Canada's Liberal government imposed a draconian strike ban. This state-led attack underscores the ruling elite's turn to authoritarianism to enforce its class war agenda of austerity and war. Defending jobs, benefits, the right to strike and public services requires workers in Canada and globally wage a political struggle over which class controls society's resources and to what end.

Workers began their strike on November 15 to resist Canada Post's push to "Amazonify" the workforce by normalizing part-time and temporary employment. They also oppose the use of AI and other technologies to destroy letter carrier route ownership, regular work patterns and jobs—issues confronting tens of millions of workers globally.

The fight of Canada Post workers goes far beyond a contract struggle. The ruling elite aims to use postal workers as a test case for smashing up what remains of public services and workers' social rights. To counter this, workers must form rank-and-file committees, like the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee established at Canada Post, to launch an industrial and independent political mobilization to stop the state-imposed dictatorship.

The criminalization of the strike was announced Friday by Liberal Labour Minister Steve MacKinnon, who ordered the unelected Canadian Industrial Relations Board (CIRB) to declare the strike illegal if talks between management and the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) reached an "impasse." This was based on a cooked-up reinterpretation of Section 107 of the Canada Labour Code, allowing the Labour Minister to enforce corporate Canada's demands by executive fiat. On Sunday evening, the CIRB fulfilled its role, banning strikes for five months while an "Industrial Inquiry Commission" meets to plot the restructuring of Canada Post.

The success of the strike ban depended on the complicity of the trade union bureaucracy. While widespread support existed among the rank and file to defy the order, the CUPW

refused to call for any collective action by postal workers, not even meetings of the rank and file to discuss the way forward. After four weeks of isolating postal workers from the rest of the working class, CUPW culminated its betrayal by demanding that workers surrender to the back-to-work order.

The Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), Canada's largest union federation, remained silent for three days after MacKinnon's announcement. When it finally spoke, it merely appealed to its Liberal allies to avoid "misusing" the Labour Code. In reality, there is no misuse—the Liberal government has systematically invoked Section 107 to shut down four job actions over the past six months.

Had postal workers defied the strike ban, it would have galvanized working class opposition to austerity and war across Canada, the United States and beyond, which is precisely why the unions enforced it.

The situation was and is ripe for a counteroffensive against the ruling class and its destruction of jobs and public services to pay for imperialist war and the bailout of the rich. The postal workers strike came amid a strike wave across all economic sectors and regions of Canada over the past three years. This past year, hundreds of thousands participated in demonstrations against Israel's imperialist-backed genocide in Gaza.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's Liberal government is on its last legs, widely despised for presiding over rampant inequality, massive military rearmament, the witch hunting of anti-genocide protesters and wars around the world. On Monday, hours after the CIRB's back-to-work order, Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland resigned from the government. Freeland criticized Trudeau from the right, accusing him of squandering money on token measures to address the cost-of-living crisis.

In the United States, the Biden administration directly intervened in a series of struggles over the past two years by rail workers, autoworkers and dock workers to impose pro-

corporate settlements. Biden has relied on the union bureaucracy, which he has described as his “domestic NATO,” to isolate strikes and keep workers tied to the Democratic Party, a party of war and Wall Street no less than Trump and his Republicans.

Biden put pressure on and collaborated with Trudeau’s Liberals to block cross-border strikes on the railways and docks, relying on the national-chauvinist union bureaucracies to divide Canadian and US workers, who were negotiating contracts simultaneously and often with the same employers.

In France, the “president of the rich” Emmanuel Macron imposed sweeping attacks on pensions in 2023, in the face of demonstrations by millions, by resorting to the anti-democratic provisions of the French Constitution to ram through legislation without a vote in parliament. In Germany, the Social Democratic-led government and trade unions are conniving in a restructuring of industry that will end the social rights won by workers in the postwar period through bitter class battles, including the elimination of the decades-long jobs guarantee at automaker Volkswagen.

The scope of the restructuring of social relations that the ruling classes in Canada and all the major imperialist powers are demanding is incompatible with democratic forms of rule. This is why all of the governments destroying the rights of workers to wage war abroad are turning to dictatorial forms of rule. As Trotsky observed in 1929 during the initial stages of the Great Depression, “The excessively high tension of the international struggle and the class struggle results in the short circuit of the dictatorship, blowing out the fuses of democracy one after the other.”

Absent the political intervention of the working class, on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program, the ruling class will gain the upper hand in its drive to war and dictatorship.

The threatened outcome of the trade unions’ and New Democratic Party’s suppression of the class struggle in Canada is the coming to power of a far-right government led by Pierre Poilievre, who models his political appeals after Trump. Poilievre staked his claim to the Conservative leadership by championing the fascist-instigated “Freedom Convoy” that menacingly occupied downtown Ottawa in early 2022 to press for the abolition of all remaining COVID-19 public health measures.

This process is most advanced in the United States, where the combined efforts of the unions and Democrats to smother worker opposition paved the way for the election of Donald Trump. The president-elect has openly declared his intention to work towards the establishment of a dictatorship. Trump represents the social interests of the financial oligarchy, which wants a political regime in power

that corresponds to its domination over all aspects of social and economic life.

The working class must respond to this danger by advancing no less relentlessly its independent interests in direct opposition to those of the imperialist ruling elites. This means making a decisive political and organizational break with the nationalist and pro-capitalist union bureaucracies and social democratic parties that have been central to the smothering of the class struggle for four decades. In Canada, this involves the repudiation of the union-NDP-Liberal alliance and a turn by workers to the unification of their struggles with those of their class brothers and sisters in the US, Mexico and internationally.

The postal workers’ struggle demonstrated how this can be done. By forming the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee (PWRFC) in June, workers aimed to take control of their contract fight from the CUPW bureaucracy. The PWRFC’s decision to affiliate with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) enabled the organization of two public meetings and numerous discussions involving postal workers and other workers from Canada, the US and Britain. A resolution adopted at the first meeting outlined the path forward: transforming the postal strike into the spearhead of an industrial and political mobilization against austerity and war.

Lessons must be drawn from this experience. The construction of rank-and-file committees must be taken forward in every workplace with redoubled urgency. This must be combined with a struggle to arm the most advanced workers with an understanding of the political character of the fight they are being compelled to wage, a task possible only through the building of a socialist leadership.

To carry forward this struggle, all who agree should make the decision to join and build the Socialist Equality Party, the Canadian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI).



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