

Trudeau threatens to criminalize Canada Post strike

By Roger Jordan
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After almost three weeks of ineffectual rotating strikes, the postal workers' struggle against government-owned Canada Post is in grave danger.

On Thursday, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said that his Liberal government stands ready to criminalize the strike and all postal-worker job action if the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) doesn't abandon workers' just demands and endorse a concessionary settlement in the coming days.

Trudeau pointed to the impending annual Christmas mail rush to justify stripping workers of their rights. "Of course, management and the union both know this," Trudeau told the House of Commons. "But if we don't see significant resolution shortly, all options will be on the table for resolving this."

The meaning of Trudeau's "all options" comment is unmistakable. Since the 1970s, federal Liberal and Conservative governments have repeatedly used back-to-work laws to illegalize and break postal workers' strikes.

Trudeau's remarks underscore the right-wing, anti-working class character of his government. While the Liberals have billions to spend on hiking the military budget by 70 percent by 2026 and have kept taxes for big business and the rich at or near records lows, it has nothing to offer overworked and low-paid postal workers but the full force of the capitalist state.

In a further sign that anti-strike legislation could be introduced as early next week, Labour Minister Patty Hajdu announced Wednesday that she was extending the appointment of special mediator Morton Mitchnick for just four days. Mitchnick's role is thus slated to end Sunday. This strongly suggests that if no deal is reached the government intends to move forward with back-to-work legislation when parliament meets next Tuesday or soon after.

Management at Canada Post has arrogantly refused to address workers' demands. A stand-alone for-profit enterprise, the Crown Corporation is demanding contract

changes to enable it to continue expanding its multi-tier workforce, including increased use of brutally-exploited temporary workers. It has refused workers' demands for limits on forced overtime and mail-parcel volumes, despite a dramatic spike in accidents, and is vehemently opposed to increasing pay for rural and suburban letter carriers to give them parity with their urban counterparts.

If the Liberal government now feels emboldened to go on the offensive and threaten the 50,000 postal workers with back-to-work legislation, it is because the CUPW leadership has done everything to limit postal workers' job action and isolate it from the rest of the working class, even though the issues facing postal workers—low pay, job insecurity, speed-up, and long working hours—are common to the vast majority of working people.

At every point, the principal concern of the privileged bureaucrats who head CUPW has been to keep postal workers on a tight leash and avoid a confrontation with the Liberal government.

In this they have followed exactly the same ruinous course as they did in 2011, when they limited job action to rotating strikes on the grounds this was the way to evade the threat of a Harper Conservative government back-to-work law. Instead, this retreat only encouraged Harper. The Conservatives prevailed on Canada Post to lock out the workforce, then used the nationwide shutdown of postal operations as the pretext for the government illegalizing the strike and imposing massive rollbacks on postal workers.

From the outset of the current negotiations, it has been obvious that Canada Post's concessions drive is back-stopped by the threat of government intervention against the postal workers, yet the CUPW leadership has kept a studious silence about this threat.

Even now, with Trudeau having let the cat out of the bag and the threat of government action to break the strike plain for all to see, CUPW is mute.

Yesterday, the union published a communication to the membership in which it "welcomed the mediator back to the negotiating table" and reaffirmed its commitment to

working with him, but breathed not a single word about Trudeau and his threat.

In 2015, Mike Palecek, a former leader of the pseudo-left Fightback group, won the union presidency by appealing to worker anger at the CUPW leadership's capitulation before Harper's 2011 back-to-work law and the subsequent concessions-filled contract.

But while Palecek may employ more fiery rhetoric, under his leadership the CUPW is pursuing an identical course. He has been quite frank about his reasons for delaying any job action until weeks after postal workers had gained the legal right to strike and why the union has limited it to harmless, one- and two-day regional walkouts. "Our aim," said Palecek, "is not to disrupt the public. ... [W]e're trying to come up with ways to put some pressure on Canada Post without impacting the public."

In reality, CUPW has for decades subordinated itself to the ruling-class demand that Canada Post be run as a for-profit enterprise and that postal workers' jobs and livelihoods be subordinated to the profit-imperative.

Rather than fuse the struggle to defend postal services with the broader mobilization of the working class against austerity and privatization and in defence of health care, education and all public services, it has focused postal workers' energies on a publicity campaign aimed at persuading the government and Canada Post to launch a postal bank. Not only does this proposal have no chance of being implemented due to the intransigent opposition of the big banks, to which the entire political establishment is beholden. It is predicated on acceptance of Canada Post's profit-making mandate, and posits the union as prize management consultant in realizing it.

The Trudeau government, which has closer ties to the union bureaucracy than any federal government in decades, initially avoided threatening to criminalize the strike. Instead, it sought to rely on the union to keep postal workers on a tight leash, confine any job action to a few days of protest, and then conclude another concessions-laden deal with management.

CUPW would have been only too happy to oblige. With Palecek in the lead, the CUPW bureaucracy played a prominent role in the "Anybody But Conservative" campaign that claimed working people could advance their interests by electing Trudeau and his Liberals in October 2015. One year later, Palecek and the CUPW, at the Liberal government's urging, accepted a concession-filled interim contract, that large numbers of workers—37 percent of regular workers and 45 percent of rural carriers—voted to reject.

Since then, worker militancy has only grown. Strikers who have spoken to the *WSWS* report unsafe working

conditions, marathon delivery schedules that force them to walk up to 15 kilometres per day, and a two-tier wage system that sees new hires earn \$6-7 less than their more senior counterparts.

Postal workers should be under no illusion. Palecek's and the CUPW bureaucracy's deafening silence on the threat of government intervention conforms to a decades-long pattern. The unions systematically demobilize workers and prevent them from preparing for a clash with the political representatives of big business; then when the state intervenes, they insist that the workers are isolated and have no choice but to bow before the government back-to-work order.

If postal workers are to reverse the drastic erosion of their working conditions and living standards and prevent their struggle from being sold out by CUPW or suppressed by the Trudeau government, they must urgently move to seize control of the strike from the union apparatus. Rank-and-file action committees must be established at every sorting station and delivery centre to call and organize an all-out nationwide strike and prepare defiance of an anti-strike law.

These action committees should break through the isolation enforced by CUPW by reaching out to teachers, healthcare and other public sector workers, and working people across the country to explain the issues in their strike and fight to expand it into a working-class counter-offensive against austerity and concessions and the battery of anti-worker laws.

The waging of such a struggle will bring workers into head-long conflict with the Liberal government, all of big business, the courts and the rest of the machinery of state repression. It requires that militant industrial action be coupled with, and animated by, a new political perspective. Postal workers can only defend their jobs and working conditions as part of a broader movement of the working class fighting on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program for a workers' government.

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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