

Trudeau government illegalizes Canada Post strike

By Roger Jordan and Keith Jones
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Canada's Liberal government has rammed through parliament "emergency" legislation outlawing the campaign of rotating strikes that 50,000 Canada Post workers have mounted since Oct. 22.

In doing so, they are following in the footsteps of the Harper Conservative government, which imposed massive concessions on postal workers—including real wage and pension cuts and a huge expansion of low-paid and precarious employment—after passing its own anti-strike law in 2011.

The Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) is legally compelled, under the Liberals' strikebreaking law, to order postal workers to end their job action. At the time of writing (9 p.m. EST), shortly after Bill C-89's adoption by parliament, CUPW had yet to comply. But that it will soon do so is beyond doubt.

Even as the Liberals, with the enthusiastic support of the Conservative Official Opposition, suspended normal parliamentary procedures and stamped Bill C-89 into law, the CUPW leadership continued to adamantly oppose launching an all-out national strike. Instead, CUPW President Mike Palecek pleaded with the Liberals that CUPW's rotating strikes were so ineffectual as not to warrant a back-to-work law.

On Sunday, CUPW issued a press release that confirmed Canada Post had cavalierly dismissed workers' concerns in last-ditch talks with a federal mediator. The communique concluded with an all but official announcement of the union's capitulation. Postal workers, it declared, "have long memories," "will not forget" the actions of Canada Post and the government, and will "hold" their "heads high."

The illegalization of the postal workers' strike is an attack on the entire working class.

It is the latest volley in a systematic assault on workers' most basic means of exerting their class

strength. Outlawing job action, especially when workers are in a position of strength, has become the norm across the country. Quebec construction workers, Nova Scotia teachers, Ontario public school and college teachers and railway workers have all been recent targets of back-to-work laws.

Moreover, the issues that are at the center of the postal workers' dispute with government-owned Canada Post are those that confront public and private sector workers alike, across Canada and internationally. They include: declining living standards; multi-tier wages; forced-overtime; precarious employment; speed-up; the use of technological change to cut jobs and increase the pace and regimentation of work; and the dismantling of public services.

Like any other major corporation, government-owned Canada Post is seeking to maximize profits at workers' expense. The expansion of its parcel delivery business has been associated with a surge in accidents. Postal workers now suffer debilitating injuries at a rate more than five times the norm in federally-regulated industries. Yet Canada Post has refused workers' demands for changes, insisting health and safety be fobbed off to a management-union committee for further study.

The Trudeau government's outlawing of the postal workers' strike is part of a further lurch right on the part of the Canadian ruling class. In response to the eruption of trade war and a surge in great-power and inter-imperialist conflict, big business is pressing for more aggressive assertion of its imperialist interests abroad and an intensification of the assault on the working class at home.

Last Wednesday, the Liberals announced a further \$14 billion in corporate tax cuts and a new mechanism to cull health, environmental and workplace regulations

so as to boost corporate “competitiveness.”

The state suppression of the postal workers’ strike will embolden the new, avowedly right-wing, pro-big business governments in Ontario and Quebec to press ahead with their plans to slash and privatize public services and scapegoat immigrants and minorities.

Postal workers now find themselves at an impasse. This is not because they are without strength or potential allies among workers across Canada and internationally.

Were postal workers to defy the government and make their struggle the spearhead of a working-class counter-offensive against austerity, concessions and anti-worker laws they would galvanize mass support.

But CUPW has done everything to limit, isolate, and now shutdown their struggle.

Job action was delayed for almost one month after workers had gained the legal right-to-strike, and then limited to rotating one- and two-day strikes.

No attempt was made to link postal workers’ struggle to a broader movement of the working class to oppose the dismantling of public services and defend workers’ social rights. The union’s publicity campaign for a postal bank is the very opposite of such a struggle. It is predicated on acceptance that Canada Post and other public services must be run as profit-making enterprises.

Especially significant was CUPW’s silence on the threat of a government back-to-work law. It was obvious from the outset that Canada Post was relying, as it has for decades, on the government of the day, whether Liberal or Conservative, to back-stop its demands for further rollbacks. Yet the union, led by the left-talking imposter Palecek, deliberately kept mum about this threat, and CUPW continued to do so for a week-and-a-half after Prime Minister Trudeau had publicly brandished it, with his statement that “all options” would be on the table if the rotating strikes did not soon end.

CUPW’s silence was calculated. It recognized any discussion of the threat of government intervention would have immediately raised the need for workers to break out of the straitjacket of a state-regulated collective-bargaining dispute, and to combine militant industrial action with a fight for the independent political mobilization of the working class against the Trudeau government.

CUPW responded to the Liberals’ tabling of their Bill C-89, by boosting the courts and the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) as postal workers’ key allies in their time of need.

In reality, the courts are a pivotal mechanism for upholding and enforcing the domination of big business. They have greenlighted numerous laws stripping workers of their rights to strike and bargain collectively. And even when, five years after its adoption, an Ontario Superior Court struck down Harper’s 2011 anti-strike law as unconstitutional, there was no redress for any of the concessions imposed on postal workers.

As for the CLC, it has systematically suppressed the class struggle for decades, including openly supporting purportedly “progressive” NDP, Parti Québécois, and Liberal governments that have imposed austerity and used back-to-work laws to break strikes.

A close ally of the Trudeau government, the CLC’s pledges of “support” for postal workers are not just hollow. They were undoubtedly tied to assurances from CUPW that not only would the union comply with the Liberals’ Bill C-89, but that it would not call even a legal national strike pending the legislation’s adoption, so as to ensure workers remained demobilized and divided.

Postal workers must draw a critical balance sheet. If they are to prevail in their struggle against Canada Post, they must take its leadership from the hands of the CUPW apparatus. Rank-and-file action committees, entirely independent of CUPW, should be formed at every Canada Post workplace, to prepare an all-out national strike in defiance of the government’s strikebreaking legislation. This must be linked to a political struggle: the fight to make the postal workers’ struggle the spearhead of a working-class counteroffensive against austerity and wage and job cuts, the dismantling of public services, and the criminalization of workers’ struggles.

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