

The working class must come to the defence of the Canada Post workers

By Laurent Lafrance
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The government-imposed binding arbitration process that, under the Liberals' anti-worker Bill C-89, is to determine the wages and terms of employment of 50,000 Canada Post letter carriers and mail sorters officially began this week.

Having outlawed postal workers' campaign of rotating strikes, Justin Trudeau's Liberal government and the entire ruling class view the imposition of further concessions on postal workers as crucial to their big-business agenda of austerity at home and aggression and militarism abroad.

It is thus imperative that all workers come to the defence of the postal workers.

The government-appointed arbitrator, Elizabeth MacPherson, has a long record of siding with big business as a federal Labor Department mediator/arbitrator and Canadian Industrial Relations Board (CIRB) Chair. It is a given that she will endorse and enforce management's demands. These include: a vast expansion of temporary postal workers; flexible working arrangements that effectively force postal workers to be at management's beck and call 24/7; below-inflation pay increases; and no more than token changes to a brutal work regime that leaves letter carriers with disabling injuries on a daily basis.

However, rather than rallying the working class to the defence of the postal workers and making their struggle the spearhead of a working class offensive against concessions, the dismantling of public services and the criminalization of worker resistance, the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) and its Canadian Labour Congress "allies" are doing everything to isolate and bury their struggle. This is in keeping with their role throughout the dispute, which has been to demobilize postal workers and sabotage any genuine struggle against Canada Post and the Liberal government.

As arbitration got under way, CUPW issued two statements—its first public comments on the postal workers' struggle in almost a month—in which it claimed that "the struggle continues."

"We will not stop fighting," claimed CUPW President Mike Palecek, "until we have solved our health and safety crisis, maximized full-time secure employment opportunities in the postal service, and reached equality for women."

All of this is bluster. The CUPW leadership has not called so much as a protest demonstration, since ordering postal workers to end all job action in compliance with the Liberals' back-to-work law. Indeed, so fearful were Palecek and his fellow bureaucrats that workers might choose to defy the Liberal legislation, they

refused to call a nationwide walkout or even mass membership meetings while the Liberals' Bill C-89 was being rushed through Parliament.

CUPW cooperated with the phony mediation process provided for under the Liberals' strikebreaking law, and now similarly intends to submit to binding arbitration.

Notwithstanding its occasional rhetorical bluster, CUPW's main goal is to prevent the postal workers' struggle from breaking out of the straitjacket of a collective-bargaining dispute and becoming a working-class political struggle against Canada Post and the Liberal government.

The CUPW leadership would have postal workers believe that they are isolated and powerless. In fact, a defiant stand by postal workers would rally support from workers across Canada and internationally.

The issues and problems facing postal workers—the proliferation of two-tier and precarious employment, terrible safety conditions, low wages, the use of technological change to slash jobs and further regiment work, and the dismantling of public services—are common to millions of workers across Canada, in the public and private sectors alike.

The illegalization of the postal workers' strike and the imposition of binding arbitration is an attack on the entire working class. It is part of the Canadian ruling class' response to the greatest crisis of world capitalism since the Great Depression; a crisis that is now fueling trade war and a surge in great-power and inter-imperialist conflict. The Trudeau government is determined to make the working class pay for the billions to be spent in the coming years to upgrade Canada's war machine, and the billions more that are to be forked over to the corporate elite to compete with the Trump administration's tax cuts and to compensate it for US trade tariffs.

The criminalization of the postal strike underscores that the Trudeau government, despite its "progressive" posturing, is no less determined than the previous Stephen Harper-led Conservative government to use the full force of the capitalist state to suppress working class opposition. In fact, the outlawing of strikes whenever the workers are in a position of strength has become the norm in Canada, as shown by the recent banning of job action by Quebec construction workers, Ontario college instructors, and Ontario Power Generation workers.

CUPW's capitulation in the face of this assault will further embolden the ruling elite.

Led by Mike Palecek, a former member of the pseudo-left Fightback group, CUPW portrays itself as one of Canada's most militant unions. In winning election as union president in 2015, Palecek demagogically appealed to rank-and-file anger over the previous leadership's capitulation before the Harper Conservative government's 2011 back-to-work law and subsequent acceptance of sweeping concessions, including pension cuts and a further expansion of multi-tier and temporary employment.

Last summer postal workers voted overwhelmingly in favour of a national strike. But CUPW refused to act on this mandate, calling an ineffectual campaign of rotating strikes instead. Even after Trudeau signaled that his government was preparing back-to-work legislation, Palecek and CUPW continued to breathe not a word about the threat of government intervention.

When Palecek finally addressed the issue of back-to-work legislation, he did so alongside Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) President Hassan Yussuff, whom he touted as an ally of postal workers in opposing Trudeau and his strikebreaking law. In fact, the CLC has time and again connived with governments to smother working class opposition and torpedo strikes, while providing explicit support to Liberal, NDP and PQ governments that have imposed austerity.

The corporatist ties between the CLC, its affiliates and the Trudeau Liberal government are unprecedented, with Yussuff himself serving as an official adviser to Trudeau's North American Free Trade Agreement negotiating team.

The "campaign" the CLC organized in "support" of postal workers and against Bill C-89 was a sham. The CLC sponsored a series of sparsely-attended "community pickets" in order to cover its and CUPW's cowardly surrender to the Liberals' outlawing of the postal strike. When several of these pickets briefly disrupted the entry and exit of mail delivery trucks at postal sorting plants, Canada Post responded with court injunctions and the CLC quickly wound up its actions.

With Palecek's militant bluster having come to nothing—or more accurately serving as a cover for the bureaucracy's sabotage of the postal workers' struggle—not just Trudeau, but also the right-wing populist governments that the ruling class has brought to power in Ontario and Quebec will step up their attacks on working people.

Workers should beware. Faced with a Doug Ford-led Conservative government in Ontario and a CAQ government in Quebec intent on slashing and privatizing public services and scapegoating immigrants and minorities, the response of the major unions has, if anything, been even more craven than CUPW's.

Under conditions in which Ford has imposed a public sector hiring freeze, slashed welfare payments, rolled back a minimum-wage increase, gutted labour standards, twice outlawed worker job actions, and vowed billions in budget cuts, the Ontario Federation of Labour has not called a single protest. Instead, it is urging workers to wait until the provincial election in more than three years' time to vote Ford out, going so far as to display a countdown clock on its homepage showing the days, hours, and minutes until the election of "progressive" government—that is a Liberal- or NDP-led big business government.

The Quebec Federation Labour, meanwhile, is calling for a "social dialogue" with Francois Legault's CAQ government,

which has vowed to slash regulations and taxes for business, and dismantle public services.

Conditions exist for a powerful working-class counter-offensive against this ruling class onslaught. The postal workers' strike is part of a resurgence of class struggle. Just last week, workers at GM's Oshawa plant took action independently of the Unifor trade union to shut down production to protest the company's plans to close the plant.

Moreover, this upsurge is part of a global rebellion by the working class against austerity and social inequality, as seen by the Yellow Vest protests in France, and strikes by US teachers and Mexican maquiladora workers.

Postal workers and all workers seeking a means to defend their jobs and assert their social rights should fuse their struggles with the growing working-class upsurge in Canada and internationally. This will require that postal workers take the leadership of their struggle into their own hands, by establishing rank-and-file action committees, entirely independent of the pro-capitalist CUPW apparatus, in every Canada Post workplace. These committees should prepare an all-out national strike in defiance of the government's strikebreaking legislation and the concession-laden contract being prepared by the arbitrator.

Such a strike will be a political struggle against the big business Liberal government and the repressive apparatus of the state, which the ruling elite will invariably deploy in an attempt to intimidate workers and smash the strike. To prevail, postal workers will have to galvanize the mass opposition to austerity that exists among all sections of the working class and make their struggle the catalyst for an independent political movement of the working class aimed at bringing to power a workers' government.

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