

# Teamsters shut down CN Rail strike, praise Canada's big business Liberal government

By Keith Jones  
27 November 2019

The Teamsters union announced yesterday morning that it had reached a tentative agreement with Canadian National Railways and was ordering the 3,200 striking CN Rail train conductors, operators, and yardmen to return to work as of 6 a.m. today.

No details of the deal to end the seven-day strike have been released by either the union or CN Rail. According to Teamsters officials, workers will only learn the contents of the proposed agreement several weeks hence when the union holds information meetings.

Everything suggests the union has abandoned all, or at least most, of the CN Rail workers' key demands in their rush to shut down the strike and avert a confrontation with the federal Liberal government.

Canadian big business, Conservative opposition leader Andrew Scheer, and the rightwing premiers of Alberta, Quebec, and Saskatchewan had all been baying for the Trudeau government to immediately recall parliament and rush through emergency back-to-work legislation.

Such action, they insisted, was necessary to prevent the strike, which has crippled shipments of grain, propane and other commodities, from causing huge financial losses.

On Monday, Agriculture Minister Marie-Claude Bibeau served notice that if the strike wasn't quickly wrapped up, the government would move to criminalize it, just as it had a campaign of rotating strikes by 50,000 Canada Post workers last November. "Every option is always on the table," said Bibeau. "But for the time being, we hope that both parties will get to an agreement."

Bibeau's veiled threat came only hours after a Teamsters Canada Rail Conference official had revealed that up until then there had been no progress

in resolving the workers' key demands. These include an end to the hazardous working conditions produced by de-manning, one-worker crews, and onerous work schedules, and the withdrawal of management concession demands, such as lifetime cap on prescription drug coverage.

In announcing the strike's end, Teamsters Canada President François Laporte went out of his way to praise the big business, Justin Trudeau-led Liberal government

"Previous governments routinely violated workers' right to strike when it came to the rail industry," said Laporte. "This government remained calm and focused on helping parties reach an agreement, and it worked."

In fact, Trudeau and his Liberals made a political calculation that it would be more expedient to pressure the Teamsters bureaucracy to end the strike, than convene parliament, which has yet to meet since the October 21 federal election, for the express purpose of criminalizing the walkout.

A strikebreaking law would have shown yet again that the "collective bargaining system" is rigged: whenever workers are in a position of strength, the government, whatever the party in power, criminalizes worker job action and enforces the diktats of big business.

Moreover, the resort to a back-to-work law would have been politically damaging to the Liberals, who posture as "progressives" and "partners" of the pro-capitalist unions the better to implement the agenda of big business.

Having been reduced to a minority government in last month's election, the Liberals are currently maneuvering to secure the parliamentary support of the social democratic NDP.

The NDP and their union allies are more than eager

to offer such support. Had the Liberal government illegalized the CN Rail strike, the NDP MPs, after a show of opposition, would no doubt have docilely accepted their allotted role as parliamentary props for the Liberal government. However, it would have complicated the Liberals' attempt to relaunch their government, under conditions where they are already under intense pressure from sections of Canadian big business and Washington to move still further right.

Speaking at a conference in Halifax Sunday, Trump's National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien demanded the Liberal government dramatically expand Canada's military presence in the Arctic and hike military spending by tens of billions of dollars per year, over and on top of the 70 percent increase by 2026 that the Trudeau government is currently implementing.

The Liberals' much-vaunted "partnership" with the unions is a fraud. It is aimed at using the bureaucratic apparatus of the unions to suppress the class struggle and increase the competitiveness and profitability of corporate Canada at workers' expense.

On Monday as the Teamsters' intensified their efforts to reach a deal with CN management, the Teamsters Canada President was publicly pledging the union's support for ensuring the profitability of CN, North America's third largest rail company. Said Francois Laporte, "I understand we (the union) have to meet the (company's) bottom line but on our side, we have to protect our people."

Far from protecting CN Rail workers, the Teamsters have repeatedly accepted concessions and job cuts and bowed before government back-to-work laws. In 2014, CN workers twice voted down union-endorsed agreements, and the Teamsters scuttled a strike even before it began, after the Harper Conservative government brandished the threat of an anti-strike law and a contract imposed by a Tory-appointed arbitrator.

Over the course of the current strike, big business, the political establishment, and the corporate media mounted a massive propaganda blitz against CN workers. All discussion of the company's provocative bargaining stance and the threat that CN's brutal work regimen represents to workers' health and public safety was buried beneath visceral denunciations of the strikers for wreaking "economic havoc."

Some of this was shamelessly hyped. Quebec's propane shortage did not threaten to deprive the

province's hospitals of their power-supply, as sections of the media claimed. In fact, the propane shortage was artificially created by CN, which continued to run about 10 percent of its freight shipments during the strike using supervisory personnel and 1,600 non-striking engineers who are members of a different union. After CN's tactic was exposed, a large shipment of propane was dispatched from Edmonton and arrived in Montreal on Monday.

But the strike did enrage and unnerve big business, because it gave an inkling of the immense social power of the working class.

The ruling class attack on the CN Rail strikers could have been countered through a campaign to rally support within the working class across Canada and among railways workers throughout North America and around the world. The strike took place as rail workers in the UK, France, Korea and other countries have been engaged in bitter struggles over privatization and de-manning.

The issues facing CN rail workers—employer-concession demands, ever-worsening working conditions, the criminalization of worker resistance and the use of technological change to increase worker surveillance and exploitation—are those facing all workers, private and public sector alike.

But the pro-capitalist Teamsters would and could not make the CN Rail strike the spearhead of a broader working-class counter-offensive against big business and its hirelings in government. For that, workers must build new organizations of industrial and political struggle independent of and in opposition to the trade union apparatuses—rank-and-file action committees, and a mass political movement committed to the socialist reorganization of economic life to end the subordination of workers' health and livelihoods to capitalist profit.

To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>