

# CUPE union shuts down 12-day strike at Port of Montreal

By Laurent Lafrance  
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Yesterday, after 12 days of a general strike by 1,150 dockworkers at the Port of Montreal against management's efforts to eliminate jobs and impose more oppressive working conditions, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) agreed to a seven-month truce during which the strike will be "suspended" and all protest actions canceled.

This "truce" marks the final stage in the union's efforts since the beginning of the strike to end it as quickly as possible and betray the demands of the rank and file.

The Montreal dockworkers had been without a contract since December 2018. Their strike was part of growing resistance by workers in North America and internationally to the incessant attacks of big business on jobs, worker rights, and public services.

Members of CUPE Local 375, the longshoremen, foremen, and maintenance personnel at the Port of Montreal are fighting for a new contract that guarantees job security and an end to current scheduling practices, which force workers to labor 19 days out of every 21.

The two major container-shipping operators—Termont Montreal and Montreal Gateway Terminal (MGT)—are demanding a threefold increase in the pace of work during weekend shifts. The Maritime Employers Association (MEA), which oversees contract negotiations at the Port, is calling for job cuts on top of the continuing speedup.

The 12-day strike against the Port of Montreal began on August 10 after a 21-month contract dispute in which the unions—CUPE Local 375 and Local 1657 of the International Longshoremen's Association—did everything to avoid a confrontation with the MEA.

In three limited strikes in July, the unions ordered a section of their membership to stay on the job to comply with the federal government's "essential worker" regulations that require them to process grain shipments and shipments bound for Newfoundland. Even after the beginning of the general strike, the union continued to observe the essential worker regulations.

It wasn't until early August that CUPE was forced to

submit a general strike notice in response to a provocation by the employer—a 50 percent reduction in wages for night and weekend shifts, and a "technical lockout" involving the routing of several cargo ships to other ports (including those of New York and Halifax, Nova Scotia).

CUPE launched an all-out strike only to defuse the anger of rank-and-file workers while it negotiated a concession-filled contract with management behind the scenes. In defiance of the overwhelming vote of workers in favor of strike action (more than 99 per cent), the union had already proposed a 60-day truce that would have kept the port open during negotiations. But this first offer was rejected by the MEA, which chose to maintain a hard line.

On Wednesday, its CEO Martin Tessier threatened to use managers and scabs to move 477 containers on the pretext that they contained goods "important to the health and safety of Quebec's economy," citing without further details pharmaceutical and medical products, sugar and perishable goods.

CUPE responded, after its usual demagogic denunciations, with utter prostration. On Wednesday evening, it canceled the mass picketing that it had threatened to organize the next day in front of the port with the help of other unions. On Thursday afternoon, it agreed to "move containers of controlled products and COVID-19-related cargo and unload a sugar ship." And on Friday, it signed a full-blown sell-out agreement with the MEA.

The general strike at the Port of Montreal, the first in 25 years, was having a major impact on the entire economy. The activities of the port, the only container port in Quebec, account for 19,000 direct and indirect jobs in 6,300 companies and generate annual economic output estimated at \$2.6 billion. According to the Montreal Port Authority, the labor dispute was preventing the shipment of the equivalent of 90,000 containers, which are currently on the docks or have been diverted to other ports.

The Port of Montreal handles close to \$100 billion worth of cargo each year, including more than 2 million metric tonnes of iron ore. The shutdown of its operations had

already led to a reduction in steel mill production, according to the Mining Association of Canada. The second-largest port in Canada after Vancouver, B.C., it is the country's main marine gateway for trade with Europe.

That is why the Quebec and Canadian ruling class as a whole reacted with anxiety and anger to the port workers' strike.

On the very day the strike began, five Quebec employers' associations signed a joint declaration calling on Ottawa to appoint a mediator and force a return to work. In addition to issues related to US tariffs, supply from China and the health crisis, the signatories wrote, there was "the strike at Canadian National, the railway blockades (Wet'suwet'en), and now the strike at the Port of Montreal."

At a press conference that day, the president of the Conseil du patronat (Quebec Employers' Federation), Karl Blackburn, said the general strike is "very bad news that has immeasurable impacts," blaming the strikers for "taking businesses as hostages."

For their part, the Quebec and Ontario Economy and Labor ministers sent a joint letter to the federal government asking it to "exercise its leadership" in the face of the strike—an implicit call for back-to-work legislation and criminalizing the strike. Acting as a mouthpiece for big business, Quebec Labor Minister Jean Boulet tweeted Wednesday that "the federal government must act immediately to settle the dispute at the Port of Montreal."

Federal Labor Minister Filomena Tassi responded to employer pressure with a press release. "We will monitor the situation closely and continue to assess how to support ongoing mediation efforts," she wrote.

The Trudeau government is relying on the union bureaucracy to impose on its members the dictates of management without government intervention, as was the case in the 2015 railway workers' strike at Canadian National (CN). But if CUPE proves unable to impose its sellout "truce" deal on the rank and file, the Liberals are ready to use the entire repressive apparatus of the state to impose the demands of big business, including through back-to-work legislation as they did to shut down the 2018 strike at Canada Post.

Management at the Termont terminal has already used the courts to muzzle workers. It filed a complaint following an altercation with striking workers on July 29 in a Montreal parking lot. A group of workers had confronted Termont executives who crossed the picket lines during the four-day strike at the end of July to do work usually done by workers. According to union leader Michel Murray, tension rose a notch when a scab drove his car into a striker. Nine workers were subsequently arrested and charged with physical and verbal intimidation against management and their security

guards.

To prevail in their struggle, Port of Montreal workers must make it the spearhead of a mass working-class counteroffensive against capitalist austerity. This strategy is opposed by CUPE and the entire union bureaucracy. Before announcing their sell-out agreement with management on Friday, they had done everything to isolate the strike and channel rank-and-file anger into futile appeals to government mediators and the very employers who are leading the charge on the Montreal dockworkers.

Their radio silence on the threat of back-to-work legislation underscored that CUPE never had any intention of waging a genuine struggle to defend the workers' interests, which would require the mass mobilization of the working class in defense of jobs, wages, and decent working conditions. Time and again, CUPE and the union bureaucracy as a whole have docilely submitted to anti-democratic strikebreaking legislation, including during the Quebec construction workers' strike of 2017, the Ontario college lecturers strike of 2017, and the Canada Post strike in 2018.

Against the attempts by the pro-capitalist unions to betray their struggle and impose a new sellout contract, Montreal dockworkers must form an independent rank-and-file strike committee to fight for their demands, including rejection of the truce deal, an end to the use of scabs, no more grueling work schedules and guaranteed jobs for all workers.

This committee must make a broad appeal to workers across North America for a common counteroffensive against the big business assault on wages and working conditions, and to guarantee decent and secure jobs for all. An industrial mobilization of the working class must be combined with a political struggle, based on the socialist perspective of a complete reorganization of the economy to meet the social needs of all, not the profits of a tiny minority.

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