

# Essential

# The right to strike

by Michael Donovan

In 1974 Nixon said, "National Security" and the majority of Americans refused to abrogate their basic rights on the basis of such a simple, self-serving rationale. In 1978 Trudeau says "essential services" and the majority of Canadians swallow it. Why?

The right to strike is an "essential" part of what it means to be a Canadian; the right to say "no" to the conditions of your work place is the "essential" distinction between a worker and a slave. Why do Canadians lie back and accept such infringements on their most basic rights?

If the withdrawal of services by the postal workers placed the country in such imminent peril why has the Canadian government made offers which are already irrelevant — by taking away already acquired benefits?

The answer can only be that the government wants a showdown with the Union. Perhaps the government, sensing the mood of the country, is looking for right wing votes or more foreign investment (something an emasculated labour force virtually guarantees).

It is clear that the government has successfully garnered the sympathy of the public. The Canadian people are against the postal union without fully knowing why. It is so because the Canadian Union of Postal Workers is one of the most democratic and progressive unions in the country. Its demands have traditionally been non-mopetary and oriented towards worker control and dignity. It is not a fat-cat union.

Just what are the demands of the Union and the offer of management?

For the Union there are four principal demands:

- cessation of hiring casual workers or term employees except at peak periods such as Christmas
- technological change that does not adversely affect union members without adequate compensation
- protection against arbitrary disciplinary action
- a basic wage increase of 6% an hour and overtime benefits to discourage the use of overtime and thereby improve efficiency and morale.

The offer of management is:

- a basic wage increase of 1% per hour
- deletion of several benefits acquired in the 1977 collective agreement including principally:

- (a) deletion of the cost of living allowance
- (b) elimination of certain savings benefits
- (c) elimination of sections protecting workers from adverse effects of technological change
- (d) standard of proof at disciplinary hearings to be in favor of the disciplining supervisor (guilty until proven innocent)
- (e) worker must accept relocation without benefit
- (f) the terms of the collective agreement will not continue after the termination of the agreement until a new agreement is signed.

There are a number of popular misconceptions about CUPW. First of all, CUPW is not against technological change. It supports technological change as long as: 1) it

does not adversely affect any worker without compensation, that is, no one is fired or laid off after being replaced by a machine, and as long as the benefits of improved productivity are shared by the workers with the government.

These are not unreasonable demands and the government ought to realize that, in this enlightened age, technological change involves more than simply the capital costs of purchase and installation.

There is a labour cost in terms of increased noise and monotony and loss of sense of control which must be considered. This cost is, in fact, the most significant since it is born by people, the very people who make up this country, who make it run, who work the machines, and who are supposed to benefit from them.

Another misconception is that CUPW is coercing the rank and file into accepting its militant stance. One has the feeling that the government actually believes its own propaganda. If this is so, it is a case of extreme blindness. The facts are that almost 80% of CUPW's voting members voted in favor of the current strike. The vociferous stance of the CUPW membership can only be explained as the result of years of good management, the roots of which run very deep. To blame the shoulders of a coercive or obstructionist union is to ignore the fact that in elections between the Union and the Post Office, the Union came out the winner in 84.9% of the cases.

In 1968 a report by Commissioner Andre Montpetit on working conditions in the Post Office lambasted the government for its management. W.S. Maxwell, Chief Adjudicator of the Public Service Labour Relations Board, in a decision rendered on August 19, 1969 criticized the government for bad faith in carrying out a collective agreement with respect to union consultation on technological change. He stated:

"The government's conduct (going through the motions of consultation, the undermining of morale, and the development of hostility between the parties.

... The government's failure must be in evidence to have a right to refuse to consent. The autocratic issuance of discipline and the unilateral determination of dated of implementation do not provide requisites for the attainment of the objectives."

Perhaps the best comment on the question of a worker's basic rights to strike was said by a person well known in the labour movement:

"The right to strike presupposes equality, which presupposes the right to work. It presupposes that the workers have the right to refuse to strike. Justifying scabs in the name of freedom of individual workers is the act of ignorance, and for the most part of hypocrisy. . . . Those who suspect union leaders of leading strikes against the will of the members have never seen a worker who is tired and hungry and who for the most part did not want to stop work."

Pierre Elliot Trudeau  
The Asbestos Strike!  
translated by James Boale



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Notice of motion: Whereas the Gazette is resolved to oppose sexism wherever it is to be found; be it resolved that the following Gazette staff change their names as follows: Matthew Adamson to Matthew Adamchild, Valerie Mansour to Valerie Personsour, Susan Johnson to Susan Johnchild, Brent Melanson to Brent Melanchild, and Janice Richman to Janice Richperson. The motion will be discussed at the next staff meeting.

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