



Statement from the Alberta Federation of Labour Executive Committee

In Response to Federal Back-to-Work Legislation

June 21, 2011

We, the leaders of Alberta's union movement, condemn the federal government's decision to intervene in labour negotiations at Air Canada and Canada Post. We strongly believe that back-to-work legislation is always inappropriate because it removes the incentive for employers to continue bargaining in good faith.

The appropriate role for government in labour negotiations is to facilitate bargaining between the labour side and the management side by providing and policing a level playing field. Government should be a referee, an umpire and a counselor, not a player helping one side or another to prevail.

Unfortunately, with its heavy-handed use of two shockingly one-sided pieces of back-to-work legislation, the Harper Conservatives have abandoned the more even-handed approach to labour relations adopted by all federal governments since the Great Depression.

In the case of Canada Post, the possibility of back-to-work legislation actually encouraged management to dramatically widen the dispute – transforming it from a largely symbolic series of regional rotating strikes organized by the union into a full-blown national lock-out that has shut down Canada's postal services entirely.

Previous federal governments have ordered strikers back to work before – and they've sent many disputes to mandatory arbitration. But never before has a federal government used back-to-work legislation to so blatantly give employers what they want at the expense of the wishes of employees. For example, the legislation tabled in the Air Canada case made it much more difficult for the union to defend pensions for new hires. And the legislation for Canada Post could very well result in workers being forced to accept wages that are lower than what was outlined in the employer's last offer.

We, the leaders of Alberta's labour movement, are outraged by the federal government's actions in both of these disputes.

We are outraged on behalf of the members of CAW and CUPW whose rights and interests have been trampled upon.

We are outraged on behalf of all unionized Canadians who now know that the federal government is willing to use its considerable power not to provide a level playing field for negotiations, but to tip that playing field dramatically in favour of employers.

Finally, we are outraged on behalf of all working Canadians – both union and non-union – because through its actions, the Harper government has made common cause with employers and employer

groups that want to strip away and water down the hard-won wages and benefits that provide a foundation for Canada's increasingly precarious middle class.

As leaders of Alberta's union movement, we commit to assisting the unions and workers impacted by the Harper government's anti-worker agenda. We commit to doing whatever we can to expose the truth about the Harper government's new American-style approach to labour relations. And we commit to do everything we can to protect the wages, benefits and conditions that help define and provide a foundation for the Canadian middle class.

In the strongest possible terms, we denounce the government's attack on the rights of workers and the best traditions of our labour relations system. We also denounce the Harper Conservatives' inappropriate and illegitimate use of government power to bully working Canadians in favour of their bosses. From our perspective, the Harper agenda threatens the very fabric and foundations of the Canadian middle class. It parallels the attacks on public-sector unions in Wisconsin and other U.S. states, differing only in form, not substance – and it will not go unopposed in Alberta.

“Those who would destroy or further limit the rights of organized labor -- those who would cripple collective bargaining or prevent organization of the unorganized -- do a disservice to the cause of democracy. ... Our labor unions are not narrow, self-seeking groups. They have raised wages, shortened hours and provided supplemental benefits. Through collective bargaining and grievance procedures, they have brought justice and democracy to the shop floor. But their work goes beyond their own jobs, and even beyond our borders.

-- John F. Kennedy, August 30, 1960

“It's important to have institutions that can act as counterweights to the power of big money. And unions are among the most important of these institutions.”

Paul Krugman, Nobel Prize Winning Economist, February 2011