

Government Needs to Rethink Its Approach to Public Sector Strikes

By Conrad Black

The current postal strike is almost a nostalgic throwback to the more contested strikes in the public service that afflicted the federal government under Pierre Trudeau more than 40 years ago and several provincial governments, especially Quebec.



Canada Post employees picket outside a mail-sorting facility during nationwide strike action in Ottawa on Nov. 18, 2024. The Canadian Press/Spencer Colby

that operates Canadian post offices [loses \\$3 billion](#) a year. Postal services are in steady decline, having been substantially replaced by the internet, courier services, and less formal business practices requiring only confirmation of

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receipt of scanned or even faxed documents.

In earlier times, there was a vigorous debate over the right to strike in essential public services. Quebec's longest-serving premier, Maurice Duplessis, famously declared in 1948: "The right to strike against the public interest does not exist." Duplessis produced many statutes improving the lot of Quebec's working class by direct government action and not by legislatively favouring the labour union leaders, whom he believed (for some reason) to be infested with self-seeking leftists.

The most famous of several notorious labour confrontations in Duplessis's time was that of the [asbestos workers](#) in Mégantic in 1949. The strike was technically illegal, and the strike leaders became hyperactive and incited the seizure of local law enforcement officials and their detention in the jail of the town of Asbestos. Duplessis countered by invading the town from all of the roads into it simultaneously with paramilitary units of the provincial police and successfully prosecuting the union leaders involved, even as he legislated a generous pay increase and better working conditions for strikers. This combination of legislated generosity for the workers of Quebec, including white-collar workers, while sharply restricting the right to strike and absolutely prohibiting any strike recourse by employees of the provincial government, won him heavy majorities from the working districts in six consecutive provincial elections.

It wasn't until the 1960s that there was a real breakthrough on behalf of the concept of the right to collective bargaining and the right to strike for government employees in Canada. The secularization of teachers and health services in French-speaking Quebec was accompanied by the jubilantly accepted myth that giving public-sector employees the right to bargain collectively and to strike was a commendable reform in the canon of human and social progress.

Pierre Trudeau was one of those who had long championed such views, but during his 15 years as prime minister, he found them to be seriously inconvenient. In 1978, he had the head of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers, [Jean-Claude Parrot](#), jailed for two months for defying a back-to-work order. At the time, I wrote an editorial suggesting Trudeau award postal delivery to the Jehovah's Witnesses and a couple of other religious minorities, since they were generally at our doorsteps every day anyway.

Premier Daniel Johnson, Duplessis's most assiduous disciple who was often referred to as the son that he never had (Duplessis was a bachelor), had to deal with a strike by [Montreal schoolteachers in 1967](#). Replicating the tactics of his late mentor, he personally wrote out an order-in-council requiring the return to work within 48 hours of all the striking teachers. If 95 percent of the teachers had not returned to work in that time, the teachers' union would be decertified, its assets would be seized, and its officers would be detained at the pleasure of the attorney general of Quebec. As well, all teachers absent from work without an affidavit from an authentic medical or legal professional attesting to a legitimate excuse would be fired for cause and declared ineligible for receipt of any social benefit from the government for life.

This was deemed a somewhat draconian measure, and at his press conference, when asked what he would do to provide education in the event of noncompliance by the teachers, Johnson—who like Duplessis, was a master of humorous repartee—said that in that case he would put a provincial policeman and a closed-circuit television set in every classroom, and he and Education Minister Jean-Jacques Bertrand, who was also the deputy premier, would deliver the lessons themselves and it would be his pleasure to rebate to the taxpayers of Quebec nearly \$1 billion a year representing the personnel costs of the strikers. He was obviously not entirely serious, but the

combination of the severe measure and the amusing afterthought about noncompliance produced a complete and prompt return to work.

As a member of the Ontario Premier's Business Advisory Council, I earnestly advised Premier Bill Davis in 1975 not to extend the right of collective bargaining to provincial employees, and particularly not to schoolteachers. In his unfailingly affable manner, he thanked me for my views but ignored my advice.

It is my contention that the secularized addition and unionization of Quebec's teachers resulted in members of the clergy—who had provided education in the French system to 80 percent of the province's children—departed the clergy and performed the same service for the same people in the same buildings at 10 times the cost to the taxpayers. They were happily transmogrified into energetic militant union workers as well, demanding the recognition of a learned profession while behaving like irresponsible trade unionists.

In Quebec, as in Ontario and throughout the Western world, unionized teachers have produced a steady and steep decline in the quality of teaching and in the level of educational achievement of secondary school students. Our public school systems throughout the West have effectively become daycare centres.

All of this may seem a discursive and scenic route to address the current postal strike, but the principle is that strikes in the public sector are bad. The employees involved must be treated fairly. But just as teachers' strikes are strikes against the public interest and normally constitute an act of blackmail against parents, especially where they are single parents or both are working parents, postal strikes are, and have always been, an affront to the whole country.

This strike has been taken to promote gender-affirming care,

more paid medical leave, and new paid rest periods, but particularly protection against technological changes. It is not the fault of the strikers that the need for the post office is declining. They should be offered something to ease the decline of Canada Post as an employer for its current employees. But the strikers have no standing to demand that the cost to the taxpayers of this declining and money-losing service be indefinitely and open-endedly made more expensive.

The government should legislate and enforce a fair return to work, and the whole concept of strikes in the public service, which has been a colossal and misguided failure, should be reconsidered. Duplessis was right about strikes being against the public interest.

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