

Labour dispute could be 'nail in the coffin' for Canada Post

BY LISA QUEEN
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Although Canada Post has put an offer on the table, unionized workers are preparing to be on the picket line as early as this weekend, according to a union leader.

"It's still on the table as of right now for July 2, a potential lockout," Derek Richmond, the Canadian Union of Postal Workers' Ontario region co-ordinator, said.

"We're preparing for July 2. We don't want to do any strike action. We don't want the corporation to lock everybody out. We want to negotiate a fair collective agreement and continue to work."

The union received an offer from Canada Post on the weekend and national union officials are reviewing it, said Richmond, also third vice-president and lockout co-ordinator with Scarborough Local 602, which represents workers in York and Durham regions and North York and Scarborough.

The union has not responded to the offer, which does not address pay equality between urban and rural workers, he said, adding 70 per cent of rural carriers are women and new Canadians who are paid 25 per cent less than urban carriers.

It also doesn't address expanding

service to Canadians through measures such as providing banking services at postal retail stores in smaller communities, he said.

"Canada Post has made a profit 19 of the last 21 years and (there) is no need to cut service for Canadians," Richmond added in an email.

"Weekend parcel delivery was proposed by the corporation, but it will be precarious PT (part time) temporary workers. They want to create a two-tier pay and pension system for newly hired employees. This offer is asking current members to accept rollbacks for future generations of postal worker jobs."

Canada Post wants to hammer out a deal, spokesperson Jon Hamilton said.

"Our intention is to sit down at the table and talk. We put fair offers on the table and we're prepared to talk and do it through the night," he said.

"At this point, obviously we're going to go day by day, but we are asking the union, we can't delay this any further. The uncertainty is unfair to our customers and our employees. We put forward offers, let's get a deal and resolve this."

Last Friday, Hamilton said the corporation is working to reach a settlement as it adapts to a changing world of mail and parcel delivery.

"What Canadians are providing us to deliver is a lot different than a few years ago. It's a lot less mail and more parcels. People are shopping online 24 hours a day, seven days a week," he said.

"Our delivery model today is a five-day week during the business day delivery model built for mail. Today, people are online shopping 24/7 and are looking for better options, including evenings and weekend deliveries. We do that today during peak periods, but because of the way we are structured, we have to pay double time to do that. That is not feasible or affordable going forward, if we're going to be doing that on a regular basis, especially as the retailers we're servicing are being pressured by their customers to offer cheap or free shipping. We're trying to adjust to our new reality."

Richmond said he hopes Canada Post and the union will reach a settlement, fearing a labour disruption could have dire consequences for the Crown corporation and its workers.

"I think it has huge implications," he said.

"I think it would take a long time to get (customers) back."

Experts agree.

While the nature of mail delivery has been changing for years, there

are still millions of people, including hundreds of thousands of small and medium businesses, that continue to rely on physical mail delivery over online correspondence, York University marketing professor Alan Middleton said.

A labour disruption would be a hardship for them and, more importantly, for the long-term, would likely drive many business owners to turn to electronic communication, from which they may not return to traditional mail delivery, said Middleton, also executive director of the Schulich Executive Education Centre.

"It will be what I call death by 1,000 cuts," he said.

"A lot of Canada Post's advertising and promotion, rightly, has been about their role, both under the Canada Post brand and also through Purolator, how important it is to get that stuff you ordered online in a reasonable delivery time."

"It will be that they have lost brand credibility with another portion of the population, so it will be a continuation of (Canada Post's) decline. It certainly won't help them and it may accelerate, in certain segments, a reluctance to go back and trust the brand. It won't be the death knell, but what's that old expression — another nail in the coffin."

WHO, WHAT WOULD BE AFFECTED BY STOPPAGE

In the event of a widespread work stoppage at Canada Post, the postal system will be shut down, Canada Post spokesperson Jon Hamilton said.

That means mail and parcels will not be accepted or delivered.

"We have an integrated national network to process and deliver mail and parcels every single day," he said.

"You can't operate. Even if they shut down large chunks of it, it works on an integrated basis and we would not be in a position to serve Canadians."

The postal workers affected in the ongoing labour negotiations with Canada Post are urban mail carriers, drivers and plant workers and the rural mail carriers.

- Lisa Queen

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