

Lisa Raitt's talking points included two reasons for threatening to legislate Air Canada flight attendants back to work before they had a chance to put their tray tables in the upright position.

The labour minister said the Conservatives will intervene whenever they see a labour disruption having a significant effect on the economy or the general public.

She didn't mention two other reasons.

First, the Harper Conservatives are micromanaging labour disputes in this country because ideologically they are delighted to put unionized workers in their place.

And they are doing it because no one can stop them.

The government's latest move to usurp bargaining rights in this country was as certain as leaves in Ottawa changing colour in September.

Even the president of the union representing 6,800 flight attendants told his membership in August that the Harper government had them over the barrel when he urged ratification of an earlier agreement.

In a Ground Hog day moment, the last parliamentary session ended in June with an NDP filibuster over the government's back-to-work order to postal workers and the fall session began with a threatened NDP filibuster over the government's back-to-work order to flight attendants.

But the party, now in the hands of interim leader Nycole Turmel, seemed uncertain how to react to this latest affront to workers, and tried to stay away from the matter Tuesday.

Like a hanging in the morning, the threat of back-to-work legislation tends to focus the mind and eliminate posturing at the bargaining table.

The Conservatives will doubtless point to Tuesday's settlement as evidence of its good work.

But the government has offered no parameters on what constitutes an economic threat to the country or significant inconvenience for the Canadian public.

That should concern workers everywhere in this country because by using criteria so broadly sketched no one can be certain that their hard-won bargaining rights will be respected.

This was a private company in which both management and union appeared to be negotiating in good faith without the long, meddling reach of the federal government.

In an August memo recommending ratification, Jeff Taylor, the president of the CUPE Air Canada component, bluntly told his members “the Conservative government will not let us go on strike.”

He argued for acceptance because they were facing a government “that would rather enforce back-to-work legislation than allow your union to strike.”

He was right.

Had the flight attendants jumped off the cliff into a strike situation, they risked losing even more.

As they did with the postal workers, the Harper Conservatives were prepared to enshrine an offer in the legislation that was less rich than that offered by the airline.

Raitt has been quick in the past to point how rarely back-to-work legislation has been used in this country and how extraordinary such a measure would be.

It is extraordinary no more.

The last three major potential labour disruptions — none of which resulted in a full-blown strike — have been met with legislative threats or action from Raitt, a self-styled friend of labour and daughter of a union organizer.

Air Canada says its flight attendants are the best paid in the country.

They had offered the workers a 12 per cent hike over five years (they accepted nine per cent over four), with defined-benefit pensions.

They point out that there are 25 applicants for every job opening and say once hired, flight attendants tend to stay until retirement.

The attendants counter they must be better compensated because they must be bilingual, must familiarize themselves with more aircraft than flight attendants on other airlines, and must undertake more long haul flights with shorter layovers.

That sigh of relief heard midday Tuesday came from air travellers and the NDP caucus.

While the travellers can take to the air with confidence, it is clear the post-Jack Layton NDP is still trying to find its wings.

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