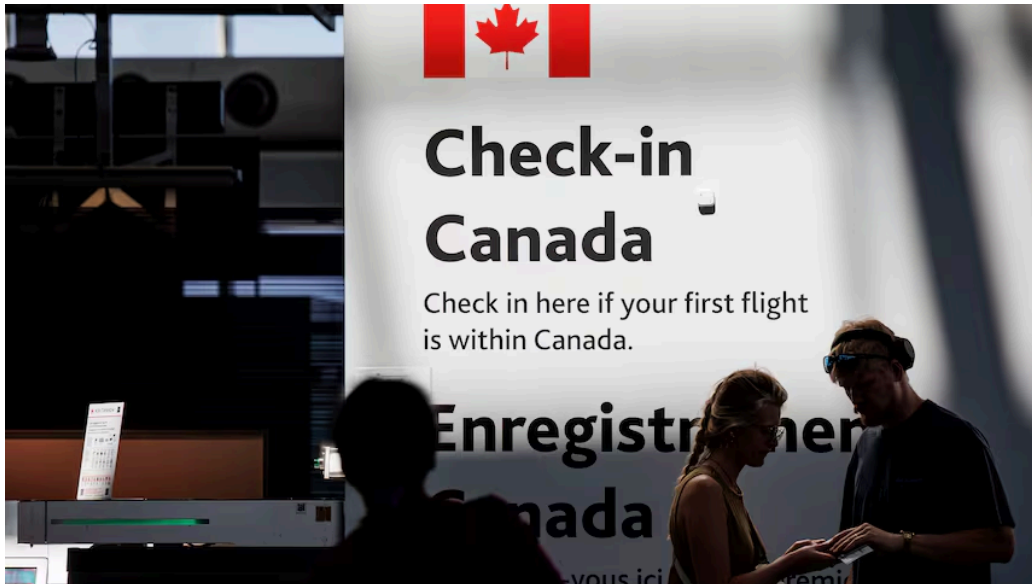


# Why so many airlines face labour disruptions and why it could keep happening

Air Canada, WestJet and Porter all negotiating with unions in the new year

[Anis Heydari](#) · CBC News · Posted: Dec 19, 2025 4:00 AM EST | Last Updated: December 19



Canadian air travellers should not assume 2026 will be strike-free, even though major agreements with pilots and flight attendants at big airlines have been settled in the past few years. (Evan Mitsui/CBC)

Canadian travellers hoping for a new year without having to worry about a labour dispute may be out of luck, as 2026 will see most major airlines from this country facing off with unions across the bargaining table.

Industry and labour experts agree that while a strike or lockout is not guaranteed when airlines and the unions representing their employees negotiate, the skies ahead aren't exactly clear, even after settling multiple disputes that rocked the industry in recent months.

In the most recent example, Air Transat had started cancelling flights the day before negotiations between the company and its pilots [led to a tentative agreement](#), but that deal came just a few hours before a full-blown strike could begin.



Air Transat and its pilots reached a tentative agreement hours before a strike deadline, which would have put many Canadians' holiday travel plans in jeopardy.

That was just months after Air Canada flights were grounded for days when flight attendants walked off the job in the late summer. WestJet passengers faced similar cancellations in 2024 as mechanics were striking.

But negotiations aren't over for these carriers.

WestJet will start 2026 in negotiations with flight attendants. Air Canada will see many ground crew and baggage workers bargaining a renewed contract. Porter Airlines is continuing to negotiate first-ever deals with pilots, dispatchers and flight attendants.

"They all have the potential to shut down the airlines in each of their respective contract negotiations," said John Gradek, faculty lecturer in aviation management at McGill University.



WestJet mechanics were on strike back in 2024. (Clara Pasieka/CBC)

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## Why do these disputes keep popping up?

Canadians have lived through travel disruptions over many of the popular travel periods in the last few years, and certainly more than in decades past.

One factor driving what may feel like a sudden spike in contract disputes is that many long-term deals have been expiring. Airlines such as Air Transat and Air Canada have been renegotiating contracts that were signed, in some cases, a decade ago.



John Gradek is an aviation expert with McGill University. (Jacques Poitras/CBC)

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Contracts of that length are unusual, according to both labour and industry experts, but they were originally signed when some airlines such as Air Canada were facing harsher financial realities.

“They were looking at trying to figure out a way to get the airline industry to kind of get its act together in terms of profitability and survivability,” said Gradek, referring to the mid 2010s.

Long contracts provided predictability and stability for the companies involved, but their industry and the economy writ large have changed a lot since then, with labour experts pointing out that unions and their members may feel they need to make up for lost time.

“There's a lot of things that people weren't thinking about in 2015 that are big issues now, like having survived a global pandemic that shut down global travel and the dramatic spike in the cost of living after years of basically zero inflation,” said Barry Eidlin, associate professor of sociology at McGill University.



In the summer of 2025, thousands of travellers had to find alternatives as Air Canada flight attendants were on strike after a ten-year deal expired. (Ethan Cairns/The Canadian Press)

Eidlin also points out that in recent years, non-airline workers going on strike could be a motivating factor.

“Workers’ expectations are raised after ... seeing other workers go on strike and win bigger contracts. Then, on the management side, three to four decades of being used to

not really having to give up much at the bargaining table,” he said.

“You have this clash of mismatched expectations.”

## Should passengers expect more strikes?

Relationships between airlines and unions may be frosty in some cases, as labour disputes cool off and other negotiations continue.

The union representing its flight attendants, CUPE, has [told members](#) it views Air Canada as being “disengaged from union and employee” matters, and that issues are being resolved at a “glacial pace” with “hard feelings on all sides.”



**PHOTOS / When Air Canada flight attendants went on strike:**



Air Canada flight attendants, pictured at Toronto's Pearson International Airport, walked off the job early Saturday. They continue their strike at airports across Canada in defiance of a federal back-to-work order. (Sammy Kogan/The Canadian Press)

But that dispute is now going through binding arbitration; flight attendants at Air Canada won't be grounding those flights anytime soon no matter how frosty the relationship is.

Over at WestJet, flight attendants will be looking for a new deal after their contract expires on December 31. Those workers are represented by a different branch of CUPE but have already launched [public campaigns](#) against the company.

The company told CBC News that it is currently in negotiations and is "interested in understanding their priorities" as it works towards a collective agreement that is "also sustainable" for WestJet.



Passengers in Halifax faced disruptions in August during a nationwide strike by Air Canada flight attendants. (Andrew Lam/CBC)

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And over at Air Canada, baggage agents, mechanics and other ground staff are also in negotiations. When — or if — disruptions happen there will depend on the next few months.

The company told CBC News in a statement that renegotiating collective agreements is “normal and healthy for any unionized business.” It also said it has a “long and successful record of negotiating new contracts with our unions.”

Porter passengers may want to keep their eyes open to alternatives sooner than later, because that airline and its dispatchers have not reached an agreement yet and the union has already voted in favour of a [potential strike](#), though they remain in negotiations.

## What about government intervention?

The federal government has intervened in labour disputes between airlines and unions for years, including in the 2025 dispute involving Air Canada and the 2024 mechanics strike at WestJet.

While ordering union members back to work hasn't always seen them comply recently, with CUPE members notably defying that order, labour experts and lawyers point out that relying on the government using that power is something employers may be relying on.

It's not a strategy that can be used widespread across any other industries," said Sundeep Gokhale, an employment lawyer who often represents the management side in labour relations.

"It has to be quite limited, but the airlines recognize that the impact on Canadians is quite large."



Sundeep Gokhale is an employment lawyer with Sherrard Kuzz LLP in Toronto. (CBC)

But Eidlin points out that a repeated reliance on the federal government ordering unions back to work could actually lead to more difficult negotiations in the future, which can then lead to more labour disputes.

"They shift employer expectations of what's going to happen if they don't negotiate," he explained, pointing out that if the worst case scenario in the event of an agreement is that the federal government forces everyone back to work instead of a lengthy strike, the employer doesn't face an expensive crisis.

"As a result, employers will drag their feet at the bargaining table," said Eidlin.

## **How can you avoid being affected by labour disputes?**

Short of hoping for a negotiated settlement, it can be difficult to avoid being affected by travel disruptions if a deal is up in the air at the same time you hope to be, literally, up in the air.

One Canadian traveller told CBC News she now checks when contracts expire before choosing an airline, so she can assess the risk level.

“That gives me an idea of whether the flight that I choose, because I book well in advance, would be possibly at risk of being cancelled and I can make an informed decision,” said Merrill Carmichael, based in Ancaster, Ont.



Frequent traveller Merrill Carmichael, pictured in Antarctica, searches online for when airline contracts expire so she doesn't have to worry as much about a strike stranding her on a trip. (Submitted by Merrill Carmichael)

“You can go online and just type in ‘expiry date of WestJet cabin crew’ and it’ll immediately come up,” she said, explaining that she then looks at the number of months between when a contract expires and when she wants to travel to see if she might be in what she calls “the risk area.”

Gradek speculates passengers may not see any direct disruptions or cancellations until the summer. He suggests worried travellers could buy refundable backup tickets or travel insurance that covers labour disputes.

Government intervention may still be a factor, says lawyer Gokhale, given that thousands of Canadians facing travel disruptions is one major consequence of a contract dispute.

“Depending on what position the unions are going to take — and they’re going to be aggressive positions — I think we’re going to start to see more stoppages and strikes and the government is going to have to intervene if the parties can’t get to a resolution,” said Gokhale.





Capt. Tim Perry is a WestJet pilot and president of the Air Line Pilots Association Canada. (CBC)

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For their part, unions say they understand it worries Canadians.

“The airline pays a price, the employees pay a price, the travelling public pays a price,” said Capt. Tim Perry, president of the Air Line Pilots Association Canada, which represents pilots at Air Canada, WestJet, Air Transat and Porter.

“When we're at the bargaining table trying to reach a collective agreement, we're trying to bring stability actually. Because a collective agreement is what brings stability,” said Perry.