

Immigration

How federal workers strike impacts immigration services | Sergio R. Karas

By **Sergio R. Karas**

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(April 25, 2023, 1:17 PM EDT) -- Nearly a third of Canadian federal public service workers who are members of the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) walked off the job on April 19 and continue to be on strike to this day. The nationwide strike impacts Canadians, immigrants, foreign workers, visitors and anyone who requires immigration services.

Amongst the 28 federal departments affected are Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB), some Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) services and Service Canada, which is responsible for the Temporary Foreign Worker program. Passport applications and renewals are also affected, with only emergency requests being entertained.

IRCC has updated its website advising that services for Access to Information requests, citizenship ceremonies, extensions of various permits, including work and study permits and visitor visas and processing of all immigration applications will be affected. Most refugee determination hearings have been cancelled. CBSA has advised that their services will be maintained during the strike, but there will be delays at airports and border crossings for those who apply for permits at ports of entry.

PSAC members want an increase in wages, more work-life balance, including more hybrid work, more workplace inclusivity and protection against layoffs. According to the job-hunting website Glassdoor, the average entry level IRCC employee earns approximately \$50,000 a year. Further, according to the CBSA website, CBSA agents can earn between \$75,000 and \$89,000 a year, after completing their training. Senior personnel earn much more. Government employees have access to a myriad of benefits including a rich pension, top of the line health-care plans and generous leave options for various life cycle circumstances such as maternity, bereavement, sick leave, etc. According to a study just released by the Fraser Institute, federal workers earn 31.3 per cent more on average compared to their private sector counterparts. Even after adjusting for age, gender and other factors, federal government workers earned 8.5 per cent more than private sector workers.

The Treasury Board published a report in 2021 summarizing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on federal workers. During the first nine months of the pandemic, federal employees were given permission to stay home using the "699 pay code," which is categorized as "other leave with pay." The report indicates that over one in three employees utilized this pay code. The cost to the Canadian taxpayers was estimated to be over \$800 million for the period covering mid-March 2020 to the end of November 2021. The report used a calculation of \$300 as the median daily wage for employees who were granted leave. This is vastly different from the pandemic's ravages on private-sector workers.

The minister of immigration, refugees and citizenship has stated that the IRCC will operate at a "significantly reduced capacity" during the strike. Many of the services that will be delayed are essential to many people. The unavailability of passport and consular services significantly impacts Canadians' ability to travel or to receive assistance while overseas. Similarly, foreign workers whose work permit extensions are not being processed find themselves at a serious disadvantage. Foreign

students who have applied for study permits and will not receive them on time may not be able to commence their studies in Canada. Visitors from overseas may have to cancel their travel plans to see family and friends.

The untimely strike comes on the heels of the pandemic, which saw the largest backlog of immigration applications in Canadian history. As of January 2023, the total number of pending submissions to IRCC totalled over two million. Most of the applications include work and study permits and visitor visas. This massive backlog accumulated during the pandemic and because of the federal government's initiative to increase the number of immigrants to 500,000 per year by 2025. To address this growing problem, the federal government increased its hiring for the IRCC.

According to the IRCC website, its workforce grew dramatically between 2021 and 2022, with the number of employees rising from 8,997 to 10,248. Notwithstanding the increase in decision-makers, the number of applications continues to rise. The backlog is not likely to decrease as online and paper applications continue to be filed daily during the work stoppage.

Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, Sean Fraser, admitted to reporters that the impact of the strike would be "severe." Even before the strike, it took an average of five months for IRCC to process a work permit extension, and some overseas applications even longer. The strike will extend this timeframe and will cause undue hardship to many applicants. To further exacerbate the situation, there has been no guidance or automatic extensions from IRCC for those who have permits expiring soon, deadlines for obtaining documents, or other necessary material for processing applications. This lack of direction is causing confusion among lawyers and their clients. The cancellation and rescheduling of hearings will add more pressure to the already bloated inventory of refugee claims.

This strike comes just one week after the government announced that Canada had welcomed over 30,000 Afghan refugees into the country since 2021 and is on track to reach a total of more than 40,000 by the end of 2023. At a time when Canada is experiencing record-breaking levels of immigration, these humanitarian initiatives will now be delayed along with all other applications.

Although minister Fraser has declared that IRCC was "getting very close to restoring service standards across all lines of business to pre-pandemic levels," that is completely inaccurate. The backlog will continue to grow as the strike goes on. The federal government will be forced to implement drastic measures to reduce the backlog and bring processing times to a reasonable period. It seems odd that, after hiring a record number of employees to reduce the backlog, those workers are now on strike as the applications pile up and processing times continue to grow. The federal government's handling of the immigration portfolio has not been stellar, to say the least.

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