



A traveller passes WestJet flight attendants picketing at Vancouver International Airport in Richmond, B.C., on Sunday. Talks between the airline and the union broke down late Saturday over the issue of wages and ground pay. ETHAN CAIRNS/THE CANADIAN PRESS

WestJet strike causes chaos at airports on holiday weekend

Travellers scramble to salvage plans after 4,400 flight attendants walk off the job over pay dispute

OLIVIA GRANDY
MATTHEW FRANK

At Toronto Pearson International Airport on Sunday, Nikita Joseph tried to calm her crying toddler. She rocked a stroller with one hand and checked her phone with her other for updates on her cancelled flight.

The Windsor resident was supposed to fly to Antigua and Barbuda for vacation to meet her three other children, who travelled there with Ms. Joseph's sister last month. "I don't even know how to tell my five-year-old that I'm not coming today," Ms. Joseph said. "She has been anticipating my arrival, and I can't even tell her when I'm coming."

Around her, prospective travellers found themselves in similar situations – sitting on suitcases and frantically refreshing webpages on their phones in hopes of finding alternative flights to avoid the disruptions caused by the first day of WestJet's flight attendant strike.

At 2:01 a.m. EST on Sunday, the airline and Canadian Union of Public Employees

8125, the local that represents WestJet's 4,400 flight attendants, announced the labour action after the strike deadline passed.

More than 600 flights had been cancelled as of midday Sunday as workers walked off the job, creating chaos and frustration at airports across the country.

Talks between the airline and the union broke down late Saturday over the issue of wages and ground pay, which is the amount flight attendants are paid for the work they perform before a plane departs and after it lands. CUPE says WestJet flight attendants work up to 35 hours a month for free because they do not earn ground pay.

After the strike notice, WestJet released the details of its latest contract proposal, which offered flight attendants a new "duty pay premium" (a salary increase of 12 per cent), designed to address the union's assertion of unpaid work, as well as annual wage hikes. CUPE 8125 president Alia Hussain said in a news release that the airline's offer did not go far enough.

At a Sunday morning news conference,

CUPE recording secretary Cameron Jones said talks had resumed.

"The bargaining committee is trying to close that gap to get a deal that we believe is fair that we can bring back to the membership so we can go back to the work that we love," he said at the picket line outside Calgary International Airport.

Last summer, Air Canada flight attendants went on strike over the same issue, resulting in hundreds of cancelled flights and days of delays. The flight attendants, also represented by CUPE, defied a back-to-work order issued by the government shortly after the strike began, and chose to strike unlawfully in order to compel Air Canada to come back to the bargaining table. The strike ended after three days, and a tentative agreement that includes four years of wage increases and partial ground pay provisions was later rejected by union members, but enforced by an arbitrator.

In a scene that evoked déjà vu, 200 union members walked picket lines outside Terminal 3 at Toronto Pearson International Airport on Sunday.

■ WESTJET, A15

As remote areas work to fill gaps in dental care, an old model shows promise

TAVIA GRANT

Jim Tennant was a dentist working in remote and Northern communities in the 1970s when the Canadian government launched an innovation that changed his workload – for the better.

"It was absolutely fantastic," he said of the program, which trained dental therapists, who provide a larger range of services than hygienists but fewer than dentists, to work in regions that didn't usually have much access to dental care. And then in 2011, the program, which had been funded by the federal government, was shelved. But what is old may be new again.

In recent months, The Globe and Mail has documented a breakdown in dental care delivery in the Northwest Territories, where some communities haven't had a dentist visit in more than six years.

While governments work to resume routine dental care in remote communities, dental therapy is once again being eyed as part of the solution.

The University of Saskatchewan relaunched a dental-therapy training program as a bachelor of science in 2023. In November, Health Canada said it is giving \$3.1-million to expand that program into the NWT.

It's still on a small scale, but experts say the efforts could be ramped up to meet growing demand in underserved communities. They are looking to results in places outside of Canada such as Alaska, where dental therapy is now well established, for inspiration.

Dental therapists, once known as dental nurses, work in schools and community settings as well as in clinics. While dentists can perform root canals, crowns and implants, dental therapists provide services such as fillings, routine checkups and simple extractions. They also work on prevention, such as by teaching brushing and flossing techniques.

The profession was established in New Zealand more than a century ago.

■ DENTAL, A15

What's the point? Puffins' curious, colourful beaks are still stumping scientists

MARCUS GEE ST. JOHN'S

If you browse the tourist traps on Water Street, the historic main drag of St. John's, you can't avoid the puffins. Puffins on coffee cups, aprons and shot glasses; puffins on postcards, calendars, beer coasters and stickers; puffin stuffed toys, puffin key chains, puffin bottle openers, puffin walking sticks.

Everyone loves a puffin. Newfoundland and Labrador's official bird is famously cute. People come from all over to see them in their coastal colonies.

In summertime, the birds put on an unforgettable show: strutting unsteadily around the cliff tops like butlers after too many brandies; wheeling through the air, their stubby wings going at up to 400 times a minute; flapping their way along the water's surface like hurried rush-hour commuters.

A Memorial University professor who studies them, Ian Jones, says they look like something Salvador Dali might have come up with if asked to paint a bird. There is that white, Marcel Marceau face,



A puffin flies above the water at a seabird sanctuary near Mobile, N.L. The province's official bird is famous for its unusual appearance. GREG LOCKE/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

with its dark, sweepy eyebrows, those bright orange webbed feet and, above all, that crazy beak, a multicoloured marvel with bands of yellow, orangey red and bluish grey.

The beak takes on those vivid hues when the birds return from the open sea to the coast of Newfoundland every year to breed. The question that fascinates Prof. Jones is why. "It is still one of the great mysteries, why these animals look the way they do," he says.

Most seabirds are white, black, grey or some combination of those. Their bills might feature an orange dot or a black ring, but nothing like the puffin's, which stands out for its almost tropical appearance. Despite decades of research, ornithologists are still trying to find a reason.

Naturally, they have some theories. On a drive down Newfoundland's southeast coast to show a visitor a huge puffin colony, Prof. Jones lays out a few of them.

Prof. Jones grew up in Ottawa. An awkward, long-haired teenager who didn't fit in at school, he started watching birds as an escape.

■ PUFFINS, A8

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