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Alberta Government Uses COVID-19 Pandemic as Pretext to Cut Education Funding

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Alberta Education Minister Adriana LaGrange announced on March 28 that the government was withdrawing funding for substitute teachers and support staff including educational assistants from

all Alberta school boards for staffing during the last two months of the 2019-2020 school year. K-12 education in Alberta is now being provided on line.

The government's press release provided no information on what funding was being withdrawn. The minister's press secretary later stated that \$128 million is being cut from the education budget, and "redirected" to unspecified programs to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. The CBC reported that a government spokesperson said the cuts will amount to a 14 per cent reduction to the base instruction grant and 51 per cent to transportation funding.



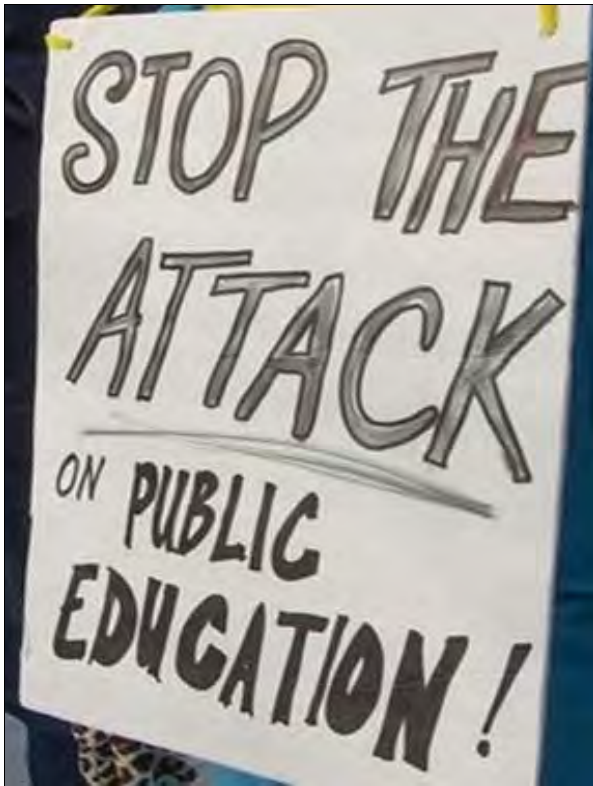
The announcement came out just before students and staff at many school boards (including the largest in Calgary and Edmonton) returned from spring break. Over the break, boards and many staff had been working hard to sort out what learning will look like going forward. In some cases, education workers had already begun making home visits for students with significant needs, and arranging for online learning. The government's decision adds further shock to a system where education workers are doing their utmost to get their bearings and prepare to begin on-line classes.

The staff who are affected are told that they will qualify for the federal government's enhanced EI program and "other support programs," directly contradicting assurances given by the Minister on March 15 when school closures were announced that school funding would be unaffected, so that staff would not be laid off. On March 3 the government pushed through legislation requiring school boards to get provincial government approval to use reserve funds, removing this option from school boards.

The decision was taken with no consultation with the unions and school boards. The press release stated that no funding will be provided to school boards for substitute teachers. How will students continue to receive their education if their teacher becomes sick and is unable to work, even from home? Will their classes simply be cancelled? Does the Minister consider children with special needs expendable and unworthy of the supports they need? When there are so many unmet needs in this crisis, the government is recklessly squandering valuable resources. For example, school bus drivers could be redeployed to bring groceries, meals and other necessities to those who must isolate at home.

The utter callousness of the government's decision to cut funding is underscored by the fact that the education minister does not even know how many people are losing their jobs or what they do. Edmonton Public Schools board chair Trisha Estabrooks stated that even the school boards do not know the exact impact of these funding cuts. "There was a need for many, many such staff that will be affected by this decision today that we had planned for. We need them," she said.

Alberta uses a school-based funding model. Schools receive a funding grant based on the number of students enrolled as well as other factors such as the number of English language learners and students with special needs. School principals, in consultation with teaching staff, may decide to have larger classes with more educational assistants, or smaller classes with fewer additional supports. These decisions are made by considering the needs of the students in a particular school. The Minister of Education appears to be both ignorant of and indifferent to the consequences of her decisions, which are based on declaring education workers to be a "cost" and not a precious resource and creators of enormous value.



To add insult to injury, school authorities must still submit their 2020-21 budgets by the usual date of May 31, with no administrative or accounting support, and an unknown toll of staff ill with COVID-19.

All layoffs must be stopped and reversed immediately. Consultation must take place with the unions as to how staff can be mobilized to provide the necessary support and assistance that the students require to keep abreast of their course material. This includes providing computers, software and internet access to all students who do not have them. A government which values the working people and the youth as its greatest asset would easily identify ways in which educational assistants and support staff could be vital supports to families in a time of crisis. For example, any educational assistants not needed for their regular responsibilities could be reassigned to support public health initiatives, leveraging the connections and relationships they

already have with families to ensure that no one is left to fend for themselves during a time of pandemic.

Using the pandemic as a pretext to cut education funding is unacceptable and shows that both the Premier and the Education Minister are unfit to govern. Teachers and support staff are working out how to provide students with what they need under these conditions. They are speaking out and demanding that the government abandon this inhuman, reckless, and irresponsible decision at once. They are showing in real life where decision-making power must rest in order for decisions to be made in the interests of the students and education workers.



Unions Demand Government Reverse Decision to Lay Off Education Workers

Canadian Union of Provincial Employees (CUPE) Alberta President Rory Gill estimates that up to 20,000 employees could lose their employment as a result of the announcement that the provincial government is withdrawing funding for substitute teachers and support staff, including educational assistants, to all Alberta school boards during the last two months of the 2019-2020 school year. Gill called the move heartless and thoughtless. "With a surprise announcement, lacking in detail, on a Saturday afternoon, the Kenney government has just fired thousands of people who look after and educate our kids," he said. Gill pointed out that educational assistants [EAs] may have to seek employment elsewhere. "You can't just fire thousands of educational assistants and expect them to all run back to the system in the fall," said Gill. "This is a recipe for a massive brain drain."

Since March 13 when schools were closed, support staff have been active in providing support for students, assisting with the many administrative tasks associated with the sudden decision to close

schools, as well as connecting with students with whom they have built relationships over the course of the school year as well as years past in some cases.

Alberta Teachers' Association President Jason Schilling pointed out: "Education assistants and other staff that work in schools are really key right now because they are providing support to students and teachers, and ultimately parents, with the delivery of education. We have a bunch of kids out there who don't have access to technology and so assistants and other school staff are providing support with those students," he said.

John Vradenburgh, President of CUPE Local 474 which represents custodial support staff at Edmonton Public Schools told *Workers' Forum*, "We don't know specifics for our staff group as of today. The government does understand that it would be prudent to have support staff assist with a new and untested method of remote delivery of education, yet, under the cloak of a pandemic, they are furthering their overall plan to dismantle public services. For today, that's in the education sector.

With 15 minutes notice to education boards, and in a press release to the public on a Saturday, this government has shown how little regard they have for working people and our public education system. Any economist will state that people working is what drives the economy. We've heard reports of \$128 million cuts across the province, this represents less than a quarter of a percent of the Alberta government's yearly expenditures, yet will so profoundly effect so many people. In a pandemic."

Vradenburgh pointed out that the government has missed an opportunity to provide a more thorough cleaning of the schools than has been done in a long time, and that in any case a pandemic response will require more time to clean the schools, not less.

Wilma Ellenburgh, President of Unifor Local 52A which represents educational support staff for Edmonton Catholic Schools told *Workers' Forum*, "This decision by the Kenney government to pull funding shows that there was no reflection on the impact to students, families, and the Albertans who support them. Educational assistants [EAs] would have continued to work until the end of the school year, so that children with special needs would be able to continue their school, as other kids are doing.

"Two weeks ago we were prepared to have members work until the end of June as per the advisement of the Education Minister. I was asked to form an *ad hoc* group to brainstorm for ideas on how EA's could provide support from home to the students. This will now fall on the certified staff to ensure the program is delivered to all students. However it is important to remember many of these special needs students rely and confide with the EA they work with. The relationship is very different than with the teacher. I can't figure out how the divisions are going to manage. Next school year will probably see a sharp cut in funding."

Alberta Teachers' Association President Jason Schilling said, "The Alberta government has missed an opportunity to show leadership in a crisis by ensuring that thousands of Albertans have continuity of income at this very stressful time." He said that as well as an estimated 20,000 support staff, up to



6,000 substitute teachers would be affected.



"Today's announcement is very concerning. Teachers and educational assistants work closely together to facilitate student learning," Schilling said. "Their work was still being utilized to support students in need of accommodations and those with inadequate access to technology. We continue to have concerns about how students with special needs will be supported through this time -- many parents are struggling and need as much help as possible." Schilling pointed out that many substitute teachers work nearly full-time.

Edmonton Public School Board Trustee Bridget Sterling tweeted to Education Minister LaGrange: "This is incredibly cruel. The federal government has directed employers to keep people working whenever possible. Even your government has

asked the same. And yet you are putting thousands of workers onto aid programs at a time when they need their government the most."



Public Sector Workers Continue to Defend Their Rights and the Rights of All

**Alberta Health Care Workers Reach Agreement
on Safe and Effective Use of Personal
Protective Equipment**

- Peggy Morton -



Alberta Health Services (AHS), the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees (AUPE), Covenant Health (CH), the Health Sciences Association of Alberta (HSAA), and United Nurses of Alberta (UNA) reached a joint agreement on the safe and effective use of personal protective equipment (PPE) in response to the COVID-19 pandemic on March 27.

The agreement requires that a risk assessment must be conducted for every patient interaction to ensure front-line health care workers have the specific personal protective equipment (PPE) they need. "As partners in the response to COVID-19, we trust our front-line health care teams to make appropriate and clinically sound decisions," the agreement states.

"Employers and unions share the common goal of protecting the health and safety of health care workers. During the current COVID-19 pandemic, it is critical that the appropriate steps are taken to protect the health and safety of all health care workers while they provide high quality care to Albertans and prevent exposure to and transmission of COVID-19. It is critical to ensure that appropriate PPE is used by all staff and physicians, while also preserving supplies of specialized equipment for when they are required to provide care safely."

The unions brought forward many concerns regarding the proper standard for PPE. Of particular concern has been the reluctance of the AHS to provide fit-tested N95 respirators when required. The Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions (CFNU) established that health care workers taking nasal swabs from patients with known or suspected cases of COVID-19 should perform a point-of-care risk assessment. If the assessment indicates the need for respiratory protection, a fit-tested N95 respirator as a minimum must be worn." AHS had responded to the UNA's demand that this standard be upheld with a completely arbitrary response saying that a fit-tested N95 was not necessary.

The agreements also specifies that the AHS and Covenant Health and the unions will work together to assess the supply of PPE, and the employers will continue to take action to ensure an adequate supply.

Congratulations to UNA, HSAA and AUPE and all the health care workers who actively defended their rights and succeeded in ensuring that proper PPE protection is in place. AHS and Covenant Care have acknowledged in the agreement that front-line staff are the ones competent to make appropriate and clinically sound decisions. This was the case before the current COVID-19 crisis, it is the case during the crisis and will be after the crisis.

The COVID-19 pandemic will continue to reveal why decision-making power belongs in the hands of health care workers and their collectives. They have shown they are the ones competent to make decisions, based on what is needed to allow them to do their work safely and protect their health and that of their patients.



Measures Taken in British Columbia to Protect Seniors and Workers at Long-Term Care Facilities

- Barbara Biley -

Under the *Emergency Program Act* that was invoked by the government of British Columbia on March 26, the Provincial Health Officer Bonnie Henry issued an emergency order restricting long-term care workers to a single site. The purpose of the order is to minimize the possibility of spread of the COVID-19 virus by care workers who work in more than one long-term care facility for seniors.

The first cases and the greatest number of deaths from COVID-19 in British Columbia have occurred at the Lynn Valley Care Centre in North Vancouver. As of March 26, 46 residents and 24

staff have tested positive and 11 residents have died at this home. There are outbreaks affecting seniors and workers in more than 10 other care homes in British Columbia and both Ontario and Quebec have reported outbreaks in long-term care homes.



Comox Valley meeting on the crisis in seniors care, February 24, 2020.

The Lynn Valley Care Centre is illustrative of the problems that exist in long-term care, particularly in the homes owned and operated by private companies and not the Health Authorities. The owners of the Lynn Valley Care Centre subcontract work so there are three separate employers at the facility. Only the nurses are represented by a union. As is the case throughout the province, many of the workers are part-time or casual and work in more than one facility, increasing the possibility of transmission of COVID-19 and any other communicable disease to seniors from one home to another. Wages and working conditions in the homes owned and operated by the Health Authorities and some of the not-for-private-profit homes are the same throughout the province, part of two "master agreements," the Facilities Collective Agreement (covering workers other than nurses) and the Nurses Collective Agreement. Workers are organized and represented by unions, mainly the Hospital Employees' Union and the BC Government and Service Employees' Union, in many of the privately-owned homes but wages and working conditions are substantially lower than those in the two master agreements.

In collaboration with the unions, a plan was worked out to facilitate the restriction of workers in long-term care to working in only one facility during the COVID-19 pandemic in such a way that the province takes responsibility for ensuring adequate staffing levels and workers' jobs are protected. All employers were required to submit "personal and employment related information of staff including their name, contact information, social insurance number and other information" in electronic form to the Provincial Health Officer by midnight, March 28. Some, if not all, aspects of staffing for all facilities will be centralized in order to ensure adequate levels and be the responsibility of the government. Workers have to choose which facility they will work at and their jobs will be protected at the facilities they have not chosen. Workers will be guaranteed the same number of hours of work at the chosen facility as they currently work at multiple facilities if they wish to work the same number of hours.

This is a measure that will greatly strengthen the protection of seniors and the workers who care for them. It is unclear whether the same measures apply to other situations, including group homes for people with disabilities. It is clear that there are other crisis points in the health care system, including home care where workers go to the homes of several vulnerable people in the course of a day, and the needs of seniors and people with disabilities that hire and manage their personal care staff with funds from the Health Authorities.

The unions representing health care workers have been involved in the discussions that preceded the orders and will continue to be involved in the implementation.



Postal Workers on the Frontlines in Halifax

Jim Gallant, a regional grievance officer for the Canadian Union of Postal Workers, Atlantic Region expressed the concern of postal workers in Nova Scotia about the dangers they're facing as they continue working through this pandemic.

In an interview with the *Halifax Examiner* published on March 25, 2020, Gallant said that many postal workers in the province are concerned about not having continuous access to the necessary tools to do their jobs, including nitrile gloves or hand sanitizer. He also expressed concerns about the level of cleanliness or lack thereof, at the two main plants on Allman Street in Halifax and in the Burnside industrial park. Although there are regular complaints to Canada Post about the need for a deep cleaning, Gallant said, during this pandemic the need is far more urgent.

Gallant said, "it's one thing when there's dust around and people have asthma and different things like that, but when this is around and you can see dust that has been sitting there for a month or two months or 10 months, what happens if COVID-19 is on the floor?" He went on to say, "and it's not just on the floor. It's on sortation cases. You can see the dust that's been sitting there and it's not moving, so that's the fear."



Gallant said that while Canada Post has assured the Union about the deep cleaning of the warehouse, "it hasn't yet happened."

In his interview Gallant wanted to thank the vast majority of customers for their support. He encouraged people to help keep postal workers safe by maintaining an adequate distance from them as they deliver mail and parcels. Whether it's at the community mailbox or in an apartment building lobby, he said people should remain at a distance of two metres or more.

"The vast majority of the workers want to go to work and get their jobs done. It's a matter of pride that we are postal workers and we always deliver," Gallant said.



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