

November 5, 2020 - No. 75

**Workers Defend Their Rights and Public Health Care**  
**Broad Support for Alberta**  
**Hospital Workers**

- Peggy Morton -

**November 5 Actions in Support of Hospital Workers**



November 2, 2020. Calgary rally at McDougall Centre, in support of hospital workers.

**CALENDAR OF EVENTS**

- **Unions Speak Out in Defence of Striking Workers**

**Status for All Day of Action**

- **Fighting for the Living -- Honouring the Dead**

**Workers in the Heat of the Fight to Curb COVID-19**

- **Protecting Quebec Workers in the Face of Increasing Workplace Outbreaks - Interview, Ann Gingras**
- **Alberta Frontline Workers' Petition for Access to N95 Masks**

## Workers Defend Their Rights and Public Health Care

# Broad Support for Alberta Hospital Workers

- Peggy Morton -



October 31, 2020. Seniors and Social Workers for Social Justice supporting hospital workers.

The walkouts October 26 at hospitals and health care centres by members of the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees have been met with a tremendous wave of support right across the province. The demands of the workers to stop the 11,000 layoffs the United Conservative Party (UCP) government has announced, and to reverse and stop further privatization, are receiving widespread support, while the UCP government's attacks on the workers are being met with utter contempt. Many people are also calling on Alberta Health Services to cease and desist from its threats to punish the workers.

In criminalizing the workers, Finance Minister Travis Toews stated, "Going forward we expect that all unions respect the bargaining process and stop putting Albertans' safety at risk. [...] We will not tolerate illegal strike activity." He also said the workers and the union would "be held accountable" for the strike.

This is the height of hypocrisy and shows the shamelessness of the UCP government which rips up contracts, passes one bill after another to attack workers rights, and announces 11,000 layoffs to hand over critical public services to private interests.

The response to the UCP government's attempt to blame the workers who are defending the right to health care was swift. How dare the government suggest that they are the ones who are concerned about public safety, people have responded. How dare they accuse our health care workers, our heroes! It is the government that must be held accountable! Health care workers show their concern for their patients every day through their deeds, by putting their health and lives on the line. They are the ones who work tirelessly to try and keep the health care system functioning despite all the



destruction caused by decades of neo-liberal wrecking.

Many people are also speaking out to thank health care workers for their courage, and alerting everyone to the grave dangers, chaos and destruction which the UCP is hell-bent on carrying out. Every day since October 27, seniors have organized information pickets in front of the Foothills Hospital in Calgary. On October 31 they were joined by Social Workers for Social Justice. The unions and associations of faculty and staff in post-secondary education are organizing information pickets in Edmonton and Athabasca on November 5. Pickets are also being organized for 6:15 am on the same day in Edmonton and Calgary to greet the first shift as they come to work.

Many organizations have issued statements of support; people are speaking out on social media and in neighbourhood forums, signing petitions, writing their MLAs, writing letters to the editor, and taking a stand in many other ways.

An important aspect of this growing resistance is that people are speaking in their own name and activating their peers, fellow workers, active and retired, and organizations. An important conclusion is that the workers must rely on their own thinking and their own organization, discussing and summing up what their actions have accomplished and going to the next, keeping the initiative in their own hands.

(Photos: WF, AUPE)



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## Unions Speak Out in Defence of Striking Workers



Many unions expressed their solidarity with striking Alberta hospital workers, who walked out to demand the United Conservative Party (UCP) government withdraw the 11,000 layoffs it announced, and joined the workers on the picket lines. *Workers' Forum* is providing excerpts from some of the messages of support.

### Alberta Teachers' Association

"When the government and Alberta Health Services decided to cut 11,000 jobs -- in the middle of a pandemic -- they left these workers with no other choice. These heroes, at their own personal risk,

have been standing up for us and fighting the pandemic head-on, and they deserve support and encouragement instead of disrespect and the threats of job losses. We stand with them," said Jason Schilling, President of the Alberta Teachers' Association. He also encouraged teachers to visit the picket lines.

### **Canadian Union of Postal Workers**

"The Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) stands in solidarity with striking health care workers and against the anti-labour government of Jason Kenney and its bid to deeply slash jobs, erode working conditions, and trample union rights. In the midst of the worst pandemic in a century, health workers have tirelessly provided the care needed to the Alberta population. The Kenney government's plans to eliminate 11,000 unionized health care positions, outsourcing them to the private sector, will have the opposite effect, leaving Albertans more vulnerable, and crippling an already fragile economy," the statement from CUPW said.

"CUPW calls on the labour movement to stand firm against neo-liberal bullying and anti-union governments and continue to mount a robust and coordinated response in the face of such threats."

### **Canadian Union of Public Employees**

"CUPE is in full support of Alberta health care workers who are protesting their loss of jobs at the hands of the Kenney government. The people who work in health care are the heroes of the pandemic. They risk their own health to keep the rest of us safe. These workers are being attacked by Jason Kenney who wants to fire them, and then rehire some of them into lower paying jobs after stripping them of their pension plan.

"Alberta Health care workers have been through this before. Previous conservative governments have tried this routine only to admit it caused too much chaos and disruption. And that was when there wasn't a pandemic. Jason Kenney needs to stand down. Jason Kenney needs to cancel his plan to fire 11,000 health care workers. [Click here](#) to tell Jason Kenney to protect these workers!"

### **Health Sciences Association of Alberta**

"HSAA supports AUPE workers who are standing up against Kenney's health care cuts that were heartlessly announced in the midst of this pandemic," said Mike Parker, President of the Health Sciences Association of Alberta.

"Health care workers have been working tirelessly to keep Albertans safe and they have been rewarded with threats to their jobs by a government that is hell-bent on ripping apart our public health care system. The blame for any disruption to patient care that may occur today needs to land squarely at the feet of Jason Kenney and the UCP," Parker added.

### **United Nurses of Alberta**

Many nurses joined the picket lines during their breaks, and United Nurses of Alberta (UNA) issued a statement saying, "UNA supports the health care workers who are defending the principle of public health care and opposing the efforts of the Kenney government to undermine the public health care system and destroy thousands of jobs. UNA members will not do the work of other union members. [...]"

"The Government of Alberta has created this crisis in the midst of a global pandemic when it should be supporting health care workers who are risking their lives to keep Albertans safe," the UNA said.

## Unifor

Unifor issued a statement giving its full support to the striking hospital workers. "In his brief time in office, Jason Kenney has criminalized dissent, imported the worst of American labour law, and made devastating cutbacks to public services during a pandemic. He must be stopped," said Gavin McGarrigle, Unifor Western Regional Director. "Unifor stands in solidarity with all of the health care workers standing up for their jobs and for public services."

## United Food and Commercial Workers Union Local 401

"Frontline hospital workers are taking action in protest against injustice and massive cuts to public health care that will impact all Albertans. As Alberta's union for food workers, the struggle of frontline health care workers during this pandemic is a struggle with which we empathize and understand.

"The right of workers to strike and withdraw labour in protest is the essential ingredient of a democratic society, and workers have always found ways of confronting injustice in the ways that they find most effective.

"It has been reported that striking workers are calling for job security against the outsourcing of their jobs to the private sector, addressing short-staffing issues, stopping the privatization of Alberta's public health care system, and no retaliation for taking a stand in defence of public health care. Their demands are about protecting the public interest during the pandemic, and once again, we see workers courageously leading the charge," UFCW Local 401 President Thomas Hesse said.



(Photos: UNA, AUPE)



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### Status for All Day of Action

## Fighting for the Living -- Honouring the Dead

*Día de los Muertos*, or "Day of the Dead," is celebrated throughout Mexico and Latin America. It is a celebration of life and death. It was marked this year across Canada with gatherings, pickets and rallies to honour migrant workers who have died of COVID-19 while working in Canada, and to celebrate the struggle to affirm that all human beings have rights, under the slogan *Status for All!*

Actions were held in many cities across Canada, including Halifax, Sherbrooke, Montreal, Toronto, Niagara, Sudbury and Vancouver. The day of action was coordinated by the Migrant Rights Network.



**November 1, 2020. Picket at Toronto office of the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship**

In Toronto, more than 100 people gathered at Dufferin Park after dusk to remember and celebrate the lives of migrant workers in Canada and around the world who have died from COVID-19. A tent was erected with photographs of those remembered by friends and family.

Earlier in the day a picket, organized by the Workers' Centre of CPC(M-L), was held in front of the constituency office of Marco Mendicino, the federal Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, reiterating the demand of Status for All.

In Montreal, people rallied outside Radio-Canada to highlight the invisibility of the struggle of migrant workers for their rights in the so-called mainstream media. In Niagara region a roadside memorial was held for Zenaida, a 33-year-old migrant farm worker, a single mother from Mexico, who was killed in a hit-and-run last year, after which people rallied at a local Liberal MP's office and an *ofrenda* (altar) was built for migrant workers. In Sudbury people gathered at Bell Park.

Between 50,000 and 60,000 migrant workers come to Canada every year under the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program and it is estimated that about 1,300 tested positive for COVID-19. Many have died and still these workers are denied health care, access to emergency income supports, decent working and living conditions.

On October 28, migrant care worker organizations released a report documenting the experiences of hundreds of migrant domestic workers during COVID-19. The report, "Behind Closed Doors: Exposing Migrant Care Worker Exploitation During COVID-19," can be read [here](#).

At the launch, Caregivers Action Centre leader Karen Savitra said: "We should be given permanent residency upon arrival, along with our families, so that there is no complication for anything. They allowed us to come to Canada, we worked here, now we want fairness."



Migrant workers are an integral part of the Canadian working class. The entire system of migrant

and temporary worker programs created by the Canadian state is designed to provide the agri-business monopolies with cheap labour. It is an assault on the rights of the most vulnerable, and on the rights of the working class as a whole.

### Montreal, QC



### Toronto, ON



Peel Region, ON



Niagara, ON





## Leamington, ON



## Vancouver, BC



(Photos: WF, Solidarité sans frontières, Migrant Rights Network, D. Ladd, C. Murphy, Peel Regional Labour Council, Migrant Workers Action for Change, J4MW)



## Workers in the Heat of the Fight to Curb COVID-19 Protecting Quebec Workers in the Face of Increasing Workplace Outbreaks

- Interview, Ann Gingras -

*Ann Gingras is President of the Central Council of the Quebec City--Chaudière-Appalaches Region of the Confederation of National Trade Unions (CSN), which represents approximately 45,000*

members in all sectors including health, education, construction, public services, trade and manufacturing.



**Workers' Forum:** The National Public Health Institute of Quebec reports that there is increasing spread of COVID-19 in workplaces in Quebec. Are you experiencing this in your region?

**Ann Gingras:** Yes we are. During the first wave, we were basically spared. We had very few cases in the Quebec City region and even less in Chaudière-Appalaches, but we are being hit by the second wave. We see it through community transmission, which also means in workplaces, like health care, obviously, but now also in the private sector. There was an outbreak at the Davie shipyard, and an unprecedented outbreak at the Olymel slaughterhouse in Vallée-Jonction.

Fortunately, there are workplaces that have set up a bubble operation, or that have reviewed the organization of work stations. But as far as the unions are concerned, it is a daily struggle to ensure that personal protective equipment is available in sufficient quantities and that safety standards are met.

**WF:** What is the work of the Central Council to curb the spread of COVID-19?

**AG:** First of all, we provide a vast amount of information and support to union executives at the local level.

For example, in the spring, we had to do a lot of work, with all the policies announced at the level of the Quebec government or the federal government, in terms of monetary supports for those impacted by the pandemic. Just to untangle all the information and create a readable document that is available to our members was quite a job.

We had to update it almost every week because policies were changing or being added. It was necessary to reach out to as many people as possible so that they could use existing services, especially in the hospitality sector where people are unemployed and where the future of many hotels is threatened, as well as in the restaurant sector, which is hit very hard.



As far as protective equipment is concerned, during the first wave, especially in the health sector, managers of the health institutions were not ready. There was not enough personal protective equipment. There was quite a rush at the beginning to get the necessary equipment and in sufficient quantity. During this second wave, the protective equipment situation still has to be monitored. One must always make sure that there is no shortage, in the health sector and in general in workplaces.

There have been many reports to the Labour Standards, Pay Equity and Workplace Health and Safety Board (CNEEST) either about health standards that were not respected or personal protective equipment that was missing. I must say that CNEEST is reticent in terms of the notices it can issue to companies or establishments. It may send an inspector to come and inspect the premises, but it is very rare that it takes action against an employer. As far as we are concerned, people's health is not something that is negotiable.

With the reopening of the schools in September, the unions had to be vigilant. One of our major concerns is the support staff. The teachers are extremely important, but the support staff are very important too. For example, we had to make sure that school bus drivers were protected. School bus drivers are often older and therefore more at risk. Ways had to be found to ensure that they were protected while they were managing what was happening on their buses.

There is also a need to ensure that support staff in school service centres (former school boards) are protected. I'm thinking particularly of the educators in the daycare services in schools. They are exhausted. There is a wave of resignations. The government has very little concern for these people. The concept of the classroom bubble doesn't hold up in childcare. They are looking after children who come from different bubbles. We need to minimize the groups, have fewer children per educator. It is being reduced to a question of cost. Yes, there are costs, but what about the social cost we are paying with the number of people leaving the system or getting sick? The educators tell us that they are being turned into police, spending their day telling children what they can't do. They are not able to play their role as educators.

Also, there is the way that the Ministry of Families is managing the issue of home childcare providers. It's havoc for these women. These are women who take care of children at home. The added health requirements have lengthened their work day, with the disinfection of their homes at the end of the day, for example. They are underpaid, especially with the added hours. In the region, there are 200 women who have left the daycare system.

As far as teachers are concerned, they have had to reorganize and learn how to give online courses. They have to control a course that is given online. They are not computer technicians. They are college teachers. They have to fight for resources, for example, to reduce the number of student in a course. There are institutions that have taken advantage of the situation to enlarge the classes. For example, at Laval University, lecturers normally teach groups of 100 students. They are now giving courses to 300. The university says it's an online course so the lecturer is able to take more students. Teachers don't just have to teach the material, they also have to answer students' questions. Institutions should not take advantage of the situation to put such a burden on the teacher as they have done.

**WF:** Do you want to add anything in conclusion?

**AG:** It is important during this pandemic that we are able to implement the instructions issued by public health so as to express our social solidarity. But obeying public health instructions does not mean that we should stop demanding our rights and respect in our workplaces. One cannot be traded for the other.

We always thought that the concept of workers as being disposable was something of the past, that we had overcome this way of seeing things. Unfortunately, for many workers things have come full

circle with the pandemic.

This is posing a real challenge to us during this second wave.

*(Translated from original French by Workers' Forum. Photos: CSN, Unifor)*



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## Alberta Frontline Workers' Petition for Access to N95 Masks

A health care aide working in a long-term care home in Edmonton has started a petition calling on the Alberta government to mandate the use of N95 masks where health care workers deem them appropriate based on a point of care assessment.

One long-term care worker explains: "With the numbers of health care workers contracting COVID-19 on the job rising, maybe we need to consider that surgical masks are NOT enough when dealing with COVID-19 patients and residents. Perhaps when distance cannot be maintained we need to go with a higher level of protection."

A joint communication issued by Alberta Health Services (AHS), Alberta Union of Provincial Employees, Covenant Health, Health Sciences Association of Alberta, and United Nurses of Alberta in March 2020 is intended to provide clarity on the approach to the provision of personal protective equipment (PPE) in Alberta.

The communication states: "A point-of-care risk assessment (PCRA) must be performed before every patient interaction. The PCRA should include the frequency and probability of routine or emergent AGMP [aerosol-generating medical procedures] being required. If a health care worker determines on reasonable grounds that specific PPE is required, they shall have access to the appropriate PPE based on their PCRA, and this will not be unreasonably denied by their employer, or they shall be deployed to another area."



AHS has determined that requests from long-term care workers for N95 respirators are "not reasonable." It has not budged from this position despite the terrible number of preventable deaths of seniors, the death of workers across the country who gave their lives to care for the residents and patients, and the rapid spread which has taken place in one facility after another. AHS even removed N95 masks from sites where the operator had provided them. What is unreasonable is this refusal to protect residents and staff in long-term care and seniors' homes.

The long-term care worker, who contracted COVID-19, has started a petition calling on the Kenney government to provide access to N95 masks for all health care workers dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic.

## The Petition

The petition reads:

### **Allow Health Care Workers Dealing with COVID-19 Outbreaks in Alberta access to N95s**

Working in Long Term Care as a Health Care Aide in Alberta I am on the frontlines of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

I actually caught COVID-19 during an outbreak at work. More and more health care workers are testing positive while following the proper protocols for PPE for droplet precautions, which are gowns, surgical masks, face shield or goggles and gloves. This has proved not to be enough to protect us. We are supposed to be allowed to do a Point of Risk Assessment and if we feel the need for N95 masks they should be provided.

AHS is denying frontline workers their right to protect themselves by claiming that surgical masks are enough.

It has become clear that since we cannot maintain distance from our residents, and we are following the guidelines AHS put out and we still catch COVID-19, that the precautions need to change. We need the highest level of protection.

The highest level of respiratory protection is supposed to be used when the long term effects of exposure are unknown. There is still so much we do not know about how COVID-19 works.

Other areas are starting to change their views on how COVID-19 is transmitted. Ontario has just amended their ministerial order to allow the worker to decide if they need N95s to deal with a COVID positive resident. The CDC in the U.S. now says that there is evidence of airborne transmission.

In order for us to protect/care for your loved ones we need to be protected.

Let us protect ourselves.

Share the petition with your friends and co-workers! To sign the petition, [click here](#).

*(Photo: NNU)*



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