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Standing Up for Alberta Health Care Workers

Militant Support for Union of Provincial Employees' Strike Action

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November 5, 2020. University of Alberta Hospital rally in support of hospital workers.

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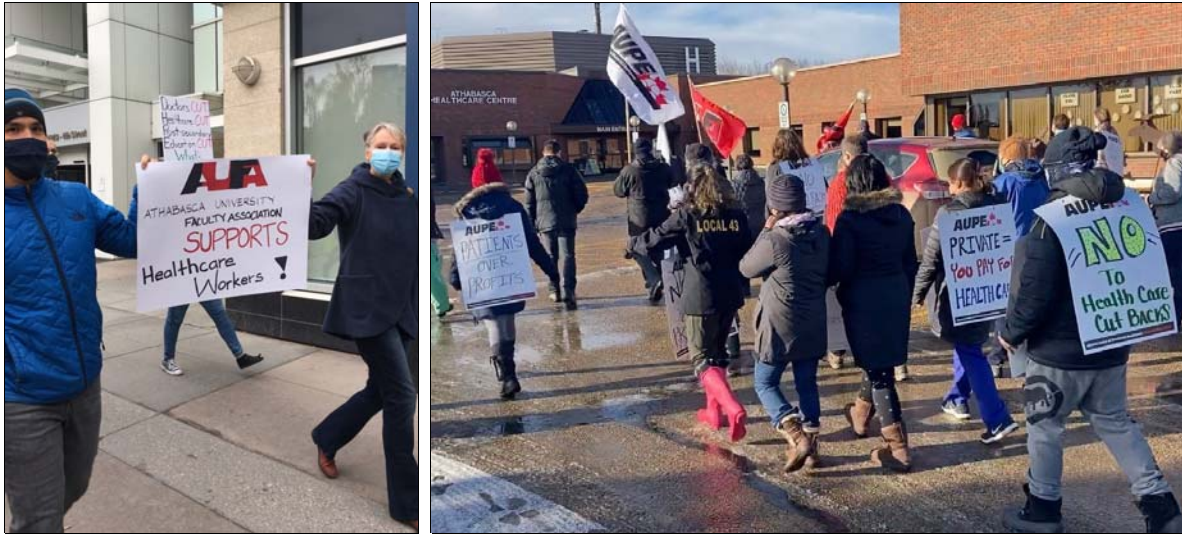
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From Athabasca in the north to Calgary in the south, hundreds of people participated in lively actions on November 5 in support of health care workers, members of the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees (AUPE), who took part in a province-wide "wildcat strike" on October 26. Pickets were organized in front of the hospitals in Athabasca, Edmonton and Calgary to demand that

the Kenney government stop all health care privatization and all plans to terminate 11,000 workers and contract out their jobs to private interests.



November 5, 2020. Athabasca Hospital.

Information pickets organized by the Alberta Federation of Labour greeted workers arriving for the first shift outside the Royal Alexandra Hospital in Edmonton and Foothills Health Centre in Calgary. At noon, pickets were held at the University Hospital in Edmonton, Foothills in Calgary and the Athabasca Health Centre by the faculty and staff of Athabasca University, Mount Royal University and the University of Alberta, who are all facing devastating cuts and restructuring imposed by the Kenney government.



November 5, 2020. Early morning picket at Foothills Hospital in Calgary.

As well, Community YYC and Inclusive Canada organized a rally in Calgary at 4:30 pm at City Hall to oppose the UCP government's anti-social offensive against the workers and people of Alberta. Speakers at the rally included a recipient of the Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH), a teacher, a person working for harm reduction programs for people with addictions, a paramedic and others. All spoke about the impact of the government assault on rights.



November 5, 2020. Calgary Stand Up to Jason Kenney rally.

Unions and associations which participated in the actions included the Association of Academic Staff (University of Alberta), the Amalgamated Transit Union, the Athabasca University Faculty Association (AUFA), the Canadian Union of Public Employees, the Canadian Union of Postal Workers, the Health Sciences Association of Alberta, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, the Ironworkers, the Mount Royal Faculty Association, the United Food and Commercial Workers, Unifor, the United Nurses of Alberta and the Non-Academic Staff Association (University of Alberta).



November 5, 2020. University of Alberta Hospital in Edmonton.

The actions reflected the great appreciation Albertans have for the dangerous and life-saving work health care workers perform every day in taking care of the population, particularly during the eight months of the pandemic. They also show the growing support for the militant stand of the health care workers in defence of their rights and the well-being of their patients.

Another feature of these actions is the unity in action developing amongst sectors hard hit by the escalation of the anti-social agenda by the Kenney government. David Powell, President of the AUFA, reported that the rally was one of the largest to take place in Athabasca in the town's memory. Powell said the walkout should be seen as "a major step in building momentum towards further labour action in Alberta, particularly as multiple public sector unions move into bargaining. It was vital that other unions around the province step up to celebrate the bravery of the health care workers."



November 5, 2020. Royal Alexandra Hospital in Edmonton.

The actions also put forward the demand that Alberta Health Services (AHS) not discipline workers who participated in the walkouts. The AUFA has forwarded to AHS signatures collected demanding no discipline, and the Non-Academic Staff Association has started an online petition which calls on the government to:

- Rescind the 11,000 planned health care layoffs;
- Uphold the "Public Health Guarantee" signed by Premier Kenney;
- Ensure that Alberta's public health care system is properly funded;
- Protect the jobs of all staff and members of the AUPE who took action on October 26 to stop the layoffs and privatization of health care; and

- Ensure health care coverage for everyone, regardless of immigration status, including COVID-19 assessment, care and treatment.

"Health care workers are fighting for better working conditions, job security, and the safety of all Albertans! Do the right thing and ensure health care jobs are protected and workers that took action do not face discipline!" the petition states. The petition can be found [here](#).

(Photos: Workers' Forum, AFL, HSAA.)



Post-Secondary Workers' Actions



On November 5, about 250 post-secondary education (PSE) and other workers rallied outside the University Hospital in Edmonton to express their unbending support for Alberta's health care workers. The PSE workers were from CUPE Local 3911 (representing tutors, markers, academic experts and lab instructors employed by Athabasca University), the Athabasca University Faculty Association, the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees, the Association of Academic Staff of the University of Alberta, the Non-Academic Staff Association of the University of Alberta, and the Confederation of Alberta Faculty Associations.

Workers from the United Nurses of Alberta, the Health Sciences Association of Alberta, the United Food and Commercial Workers, Seniors Action and Liaison Team, and the Alberta Federation of Labour also rallied with the PSE workers. A similar noon hour event was held simultaneously in Calgary at the Chumir Health Centre.

The PSE workers at the University Hospital rally carried signs such as "Public Care Not Private," "Solidarity with Health Care Workers," "An Injury to One is an Injury to All," "Health Care Cuts Never Heal," "Fire Kenney Not Workers" and "Stop Jason and the Golden Fleecers," as well as waving their colourful union flags. The protesters went on a short march near the hospital, shouting slogans in support of the health care workers. The most popular slogan was "Hey Hey! Ho Ho! Jason Kenney's Got to Go!"



Previously, on October 26, hundreds of health care workers at over 40 worksites across Alberta walked off the job to protest plans by the provincial government to outsource 11,000 health care jobs and to privatize crucial parts of the health care system. Health care workers have been working tirelessly for communities since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, and took a courageous stand for public health care. The November 5 lunch hour picket was an opportunity for the PSE and other workers to recognize the health care workers' courage and to show unwavering support for

them and for public health care. More pickets will be held in the future.

(Photos: Workers' Forum.)



Union of Provincial Employees President Congratulates Members



Alberta Union of Provincial Employees (AUPE) President Guy Smith spoke to workers about their October 26 strike in a video posted on the AUPE site.

"This week AUPE workers took a heroic stand against some of the biggest bullies Alberta has ever faced. In a single day you drew national attention to the privatization agenda of the UCP government. In a single day you showed your neighbours and fellow workers how collective strength pulls whole communities together. In a single day, you gained unprecedented public awareness and support. You made a real difference in a single day. But we know the fight to save jobs

and preserve Alberta's most critical public services is not won in a single day. It's a long haul. It takes the kind of guts and determination that you all showed with such bravery on October 26," Smith said.

"I feel proud of you for taking the stand that you chose to take. I feel a growing sense of resistance and a growing sense of courage to fight to save jobs. [...]"

"These struggles are won over time, not in a single day," Smith said, "and continue to fight we will!"

To see the complete video, [click here](#).

(Photo: Progress Alberta.)



Discussion on Significance of Attacks on Health Care Workers

Lively discussion is taking place on the action taken by Alberta hospital workers on October 26. Many people are pointing out that privatization steals needed resources from public services and from the workers who deliver these services. This money is not "saved" but goes into the coffers of the rich, particularly to big global corporations whose profits are guaranteed by lucrative contracts with subservient governments.

Parkland Institute



Speaking of the 11,000 workers who the Kenney government plans to lay off, the Parkland Institute pointed out that 83 per cent of workers in health care are women, many of whom are from minority communities and are recent immigrants, and now the UCP government is doubling and tripling down on women who are already disproportionately affected by the pandemic.

"Past experience from British Columbia, Ontario and the United Kingdom shows that when these positions are outsourced, workers are often laid off, only to be re-hired at lower compensation, reduced benefits, precarious hours, and increased duties. Corners are cut to save time and money, increasing the risk of error, injury and -- in the case of housekeeping and laundry -- the likelihood of infection," the institute stated.

"Private sector contracts, while awarded to the lowest bidder, are based on profit margins: cutting wages, benefits and staffing numbers while receiving public tax dollars for lower quality service. Workers are caught in the middle, desperately trying to maintain the standards of care with fewer resources and outdated equipment.

"This 'transformational change' to Alberta's health care system will not benefit Albertans. It will enact a transfer of wealth from health care workers to private corporations and leave Albertans more at risk during the health crisis of the century," the statement concluded.

In response to the claim by Jason Kenney that rural laundry services would be privatized because it was "too costly" to buy new equipment, a former Alberta cabinet minister tweeted, "A privatized laundry company will capitalize the machinery and charge it back to the government, plus a 30 per cent profit. Workers get far less, taxpayers pay more."

In the Canadian Law of Work Forum, Bob Barnetson and Jason Foster of Athabasca University wrote, "Asserting that unions should 'respect the bargaining process' is difficult to reconcile with the UCP government repeatedly interfering with public-sector bargaining and bargaining rights in the past 18 months. They unilaterally postponed arbitration deadlines that were enshrined in collective agreements. They gave themselves the right to impose binding and secret bargaining mandates on public-sector agencies. They tore up a legally negotiated deal with Alberta's doctors, imposing a legislated contract. They have passed bills constraining workers' rights to picket. Their recently passed Bill 32 imposes a series of restrictions on union activity, including limits on the right to strike. Apparently, the government expects unions to abide by the law, no matter how unfair, while at the same time affords itself the right to change rules that are inconvenient for the government."



(Photos: Workers' Forum.)



Quebec Public Sector Negotiations

Government Negotiators Reject Workers' Proposals to Deal with Second Wave of Pandemic



November 9, 2020. Health and social services workers occupy Montreal Treasury Board office to demand action on their contract demands.

In a press conference on November 2, the Federation of Health and Social Services (FSSS-CSN) denounced the government for continuing to reject workers' demands in contract negotiations, most importantly those concerned with effectively dealing with the second wave of COVID-19. Collective agreements of approximately 550,000 public sector workers in Quebec expired on March 31, 2020. Negotiations began about a year ago but no new collective agreement has yet been signed, and, according to the unions, no agreement is in sight and will not be until the government begins to negotiate seriously to meet the workers' pressing demands.

According to the most recent data from the Quebec Ministry of Health and Social Services and the Quebec National Institute of Public Health, close to 17,000 health care workers have contracted COVID-19 since the beginning of the pandemic. More than 400 have been hospitalized and 13 workers lost their lives.

The press release issued by the FSSS-CSN at the press conference states:

"Last Thursday [October 29], at the negotiation table, on the sole subject of measures to be taken within the framework of COVID-19, the representatives of the Ministry of Health and Social Services clearly indicated that the Ministry had no interest in working with us to put in place measures aimed at substantially improving prevention during a pandemic period or setting up any form of



recognition to keep employees on the front line motivated."

On the same day, Minister of Health and Social Services Christian Dubé publicly indicated his intention to work with the unions to strengthen measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

The opposite is happening at the bargaining table, according to the Federation.

Measures to Deal with Crisis in Health and Social Services Network

The Federation's press release outlines the proposals made to government. The measures proposed aim to reduce the risk of infection, ensure the protection of users and staff and better recognize their essential contribution during the pandemic. They include:

- Provide all personnel with the appropriate and necessary personal protective equipment (PPE) by ensuring a sufficient supply of equipment at all times, in particular by making the N95 mask available.
- Provide uniforms and maintain them.
- Provide eating and rest areas that allow physical distancing measures to be respected at all times.
- Prohibit the movement of personnel across multiple sites, facilities, services or units.
- Prohibit the use of employment agency personnel.
- Provide access to an expedited testing process for staff and their immediate family members.
- Place all at-risk staff in paid isolation or telework.
- Establish joint local and national inter-union health crisis committees to force employers and government to pass on information and listen to problems on the ground.
- Provide additional psychological support.
- Agree on guidelines for teleworking.
- Suspend parking fees.
- Make COVID premiums more widely available.

Government Representatives Reject Workers' Proposals

FSSS-CSN Vice-President Josée Marcotte said that government representatives rejected all of the Federation's proposals. She reported that they are proposing the same measures that the government put in place before the first wave of the pandemic, which turned out to be a disaster.

For example, on the issue of personal protective equipment, they only propose that institutions "make efforts to comply with the recommendations of the National Institute of Public Health."

On the issue of providing and maintaining uniforms for staff, they propose to provide uniforms in certain areas only and only according to what they call "institutional feasibility." This is a lower prevention standard than what is found at McDonald's and Tim Hortons, according to Marcotte. The government is not even prepared to take the measures necessary to prevent the circulation of contaminated clothing and is willing to leave that to the discretion of the establishments. "No wonder the virus is spreading throughout the health and social services network and the population,"

she added.

Instead of committing to providing staff with eating areas that allow them to comply with health measures such as physical distancing, by ordering institutions to provide them, government officials propose to "remind" institutions that these safe areas are part of the health measures in place. At the table, government officials even accused staff of not complying with health regulations and stated that it is the workers' fault if there is contamination.



Government officials are refusing to prohibit the movement of staff between facilities or departments to stop the spread of COVID-19, which is also part of the government's official action plan for the second wave. As a result, employers continue to relocate staff and post positions with multiple sites or departments.

Marcotte went on to say: "The government must not skimp on the measures that need to be taken. The health and safety of the workers and of the people is not a bargaining issue, it's a matter of life and death. [...] What health care workers need at this time is not contempt from the government but recognition and most importantly maximum protection so that our guardian angels do not become angels, period. What we want is to do the maximum to protect the workers and the population."

At the conclusion of the press conference, FSSS-CSN President Jeff Begley said that he has taken note of the proposal of the Minister of Health to sit down with the unions to improve prevention against COVID-19, but that for this to happen there must be a real dialogue and measures taken by the ministry to protect the staff. He emphasized the need for serious discussions because the situation is urgent, and there is a need to make up for lost time.



November 9, 2020. Treasury Board office in Montreal.

(Quotations translated from original French by Workers' Forum.)



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