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on All Public Sector Workers**

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On December 11, New Brunswick Premier Blaine Higgs informed officials of the Canadian Union

of Public Employees New Brunswick at a meeting that his government is planning to impose a wage freeze followed by wage restraint on all the public sector workers in the province, unionized and non-unionized. This comes in the midst of the stresses and anxiety caused by pandemic working conditions. Already, for twelve years, New Brunswick workers have been fighting against wage freezes imposed by successive governments which have declared they have "wage restraint mandates."



April 12, 2018. CUPE health care workers rally in Fredericton in defence of the right to negotiate acceptable wages and working conditions.

As a justification for the imposition of this dictate regarding public sector workers' contract negotiations, Premier Higgs told the press: "What we want to do is manage expectations, and turn this negotiation into thinking different about what we learned from COVID. Let's not turn it into a lot of discussion around salaries we're trying to protect, but what we can do differently to meet our needs and what we learned through COVID."

What workers learned in a dramatic way from the pandemic is that they are the essential factor in preserving and advancing society, and that their living and working conditions and their say in these conditions make the difference between life and death. They have learned that economic recovery must be human-centred, with public enterprise under the control of the people to look after the well-being of the people. The elimination of public sector workers' ability to negotiate wages and working conditions that are acceptable to themselves aggravates all the problems of the sector and affects the delivery of public services. This announcement will affect retention of public servants as well as the attraction of new public servants. The destruction of the public service in favour of hiring private contractors to carry out their work will further destroy the fabric of society as everyone is further forced to fend for themselves.

What the Premier seems to believe is that COVID-19 provides "an opportunity" to impose dictates in the name of high ideals about protecting people's health. It is a sick mind-set behind which is the pay-the-rich schemes demanded by the narrow private interests which have taken over the decision-making power and operation of state agencies, beginning with the premier's office. Higgs' "what we can do differently to meet our needs" shows he makes no bones about his government's stand that narrow private interests are the key to post-pandemic recovery and that all society's resources must be put under their control and ownership.

Workers' Forum stands firmly with the New Brunswick workers facing this renewed assault, and calls upon all Canadian workers to support them in their just fight. It is as clear as clear can be that our future and our security lie in the fight to affirm of the rights of all.

(Photo: CUPE NB)



Public Sector Workers Oppose Government Dictate

- Interview, Simon Ouellette -

Simon Ouellette is the Communications Representative, Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Maritimes (New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island).

Workers' Forum: In its December 11 press release, the Canadian Union of Public Employees New Brunswick, opposes the imposition of a wage freeze on public sector workers by the Blaine Higgs government. Can you tell us more about this?

Simon Ouellette: CUPE New Brunswick organized a press conference on the afternoon of December 11 immediately after meeting with the Premier. At our request, the Premier agreed to meet with the elected officials of the major CUPE locals in the province, large locals that are without a collective agreement at this time. Some have been without a contract since 2016, the majority of them have been without a contract since 2018. We're talking about 20,500 workers who are struggling with governments that have not wanted to negotiate with them in recent years, both the Liberals who let negotiations drag on and the Conservatives in power at this time.



In the days leading up to our meeting with the Premier, we learned through the media that the government intends to impose a wage freeze on the entire public service. The Premier confirmed to us at our meeting that he intends to impose a wage freeze for the first year and then a wage restraint on the entire public service, unionized and non-unionized.

This statement is not being made at the bargaining tables. It is being made publicly, in the newspapers, in a politicized manner. It's shocking to hear that, especially in a time of pandemic.

There are negotiations going on right now, among health care workers in particular, but they are not real negotiations because the government's offer to them is a wage freeze followed by wage restraint, which is exactly what we heard at our meeting. There's really no room for bargaining in there.

WF: What is CUPE's position on this government dictate?

SO: We've been saying for years that wages have been stagnating for at least a dozen years. We have faced zero increases, one per cent increases, wage restraint mandates from previous administrations.

Wage increases over all these years have been well below the increase in the cost of living. All of this has resulted in our members falling behind in terms of their real purchasing power. We want to counteract that.

The cost of living is rising. In New Brunswick, the cost of rent is out of control right now, there is a housing crisis in the province. New Brunswick is the province in Canada where tenants' rights are weakest. It is a paradise for landlords. Gasoline and heating are extremely expensive. The electricity bill is much higher in New Brunswick than in Quebec for example. We have small province wages with big city bills.

In our opinion, the best way out of the pandemic is by stimulating sustainable growth, putting money in the pockets of our workers, into our public infrastructure, into our public systems. You can't stimulate growth through subsidies to corporations.

CUPE is going to fight the imposition of a wage freeze and wage restraints.

At the end of the day, the people who have the last word are our members. It's up to them at each table to decide what they want to do.

We have faced the pandemic, there is hope at the end of the tunnel now, we have been able to come together and stand together against this virus. If we can stand up to a virus, we can stand up to this government as well. That's why we have our slogan "Front Line Heroes Shouldn't Get Zeros."

By frontline workers, we mean public service workers, and I include workers in the private sector as well, like those in grocery stores, retail and others who do phenomenal work. Having a base salary for everyone that's decent is like the rising tide that lifts all boats.

It can't go on the way it is. We have retention and recruitment crises in almost every area of public service. The government of New Brunswick does not recognize this problem and it is not its desire to solve it either.

It is not a new problem in the Maritimes. Many people who have wanted to improve their working conditions have moved away. New Brunswick has had some population declines in the last few years. People of working age are leaving in large numbers. Those who stay are the older people who need care, but there are fewer people of working age who stay because they want to make a life elsewhere.



Things have changed a lot in the public sector. Before, in the 1970s and 1980s, a worker wanted to finish his or her career in the public service, with a good pension, a good job, a good wage. This includes workers in the trades, such as welders and others. People did everything they could to get a job in the public sector. Now it's the other way around. The private sector wants the province to cover the costs of training, wants the province to pick up the young people who come out of schools and community colleges, do their apprenticeship years and then have them end up in

the private sector. Big corporate giants like Irving have put a lot of pressure on the provincial government to reverse the situation so that the private sector can have its workers trained from the public purse. It's a form of outsourcing labour costs by large corporations.

I think that working for the public sector is something that makes one very proud. But working

conditions and wages have declined. Workers deserve better wages and working conditions. That is the issue. CUPE made it very clear to the Premier that it does not agree with the wage freeze/restriction mandate the Higgs government wants to impose on public sector workers.

(Translated from original French by Workers' Forum. Photos: WF)



Manitoba Government's Anti-Labour Legislation Bill 16 Targets Workers and Their Defence Organizations



The Manitoba Federation of Labour, labour law firms and public and private sector unions have all denounced the anti-labour legislation introduced by the Pallister government, in particular Bill 16, the *Labour Relations Amendment Act*, for its aim of legalizing the denial of workers' rights.

National Union of Public and General Employees (NUPGE) President Larry Brown pointed out that "Bill 16 is particularly offensive in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, as frontline workers are risking their lives to provide crucial public services to Manitobans."

In a November 27 press release, the Public Service Alliance of Canada notes that "Premier Brian Pallister is taking a page out of Alberta Premier Jason Kenney's book, who makes undermining workers' labour rights practically his full-time job."

The Manitoba Conservative government introduced 33 pieces of legislation on October 14, several of which amend labour legislation. The most significant is Bill 16, the *Labour Relations Amendment Act*, which would make significant changes, all designed to weaken and hamstring workers' organizations and make it easier for employers and the state to interfere with workers' right to organize collectively to defend their interests. Almost all the new bills introduced on October 14, with the exception of those that dealt with measures to address the COVID-19 pandemic, have not been passed or even debated in the legislature as of December 4.

Bill 16 is part of the restructuring of state arrangements by neo-liberal forces at the provincial and federal levels designed to facilitate schemes to pay the rich and to dismantle existing arrangements that are considered an obstacle to their unfettered power. To cover up that intent legislation that diminishes protection of workers' rights and weakens their collectives is couched in the language of "choice" and "protection." The Pallister Conservatives, like every other cartel party, claims that because they were elected they have a mandate to do whatever they please and call it the will of the people. Government House Leader Kelvin Goertzen told the media: "Our government was entrusted by Manitobans with the largest back-to-back majorities in over 100 years and our legislative agenda supports our mandate to protect Manitobans."

Bill 16 "amends" the *Manitoba Labour Relations Act* by introducing changes that give more power to employers and the state itself to interfere in the affairs of workers' organizations, make it more difficult for workers to organize themselves collectively, and gives more power to employers to dictate working conditions and to act as judge, jury and executioner with the power to fire workers for what the employer deems inappropriate activity during a strike. Bill 16 has many features similar to the anti-labour legislation of the Kenney government in Alberta and legislation passed at the federal level by the Harper Conservatives.

Highlights of Bill 16

- Employers will be able to fire workers for actions during a strike, replacing the current restriction that workers could only be fired if convicted of a criminal offence;
- Before a vote for union certification can be held, the Labour Relations Board must be satisfied that the union applying for certification has the support, through signed cards and a vote by secret ballot, of 40 per cent of the "anticipated workforce" (currently 40 per cent of the actual workforce). There is no definition of "anticipated" but it would certainly impact seasonal work like construction sites. If the board determines that the union does not have the support of 40 per cent of the "anticipated workforce" it can delay the vote or dismiss the certification application. This would also allow employers in many workplaces to argue that COVID-19 has made the current workforce far less than the "anticipated workforce";
- Lowers the percentage of support required for a vote to be held for workers to change unions from 45 per cent to 40 per cent;
- Lowers the percentage of support required for a vote on decertification of a union from 50 per cent to 40 per cent;
- Completely eliminates the requirement for an employer to give any notice, with 90 days currently required, of technological changes that would affect a significant number of workers;
- Eliminates the requirement that an employer that has purchased a business keep the workers, their union and their collective agreement if the board is satisfied that the "character of the business is substantially changed";
- Removes the automatic involvement of the board in settling a first collective agreement through arbitration, making it conditional on the board's determination of whether the party applying for arbitration had bargained in good faith, and eliminates the current provision that the board can arbitrate a subsequent collective agreement if a strike or lockout has exceeded 60 days;
- Mandates that public sector unions have their financial statements audited by an independent auditor and provide the audited financial statements to members. This would expose the union's financial position to employers. Similar legislation was passed by the Harper government federally

in 2015 and subsequently repealed, and has been passed by the Kenney government in Alberta.

This government attack on workers and their collectives comes on the heels of the defeat in the courts of the Pallister government's 2017 Bill 29, the *Public Services Sustainability Act* which would have frozen public sector wages. In June 2020, Court of Queen's Bench Justice Joan McKelvey ruled that Bill 29 violated workers' charter rights and "left no room for a meaningful collective bargaining process on issues crucial to union memberships."

(Photo: WF)



Stop Paying the Rich! Increase Investments in Social Programs!
Dismantling Quebec's Public Health System
Cannot Be Justified

- Pierre Soublière -



One of the things the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the fore is the extent to which private interests have a stranglehold over all aspects of our lives, including our mode of governance.

This situation came tragically to light with the incapacity of seniors' homes and long-term care facilities to face the pandemic and the need for public services managed and organized to answer the needs of patients and care providers. For example, one of the ongoing problems that continue during the second wave is staff mobility in homes, because of staff shortages and the dependence on private employment agencies who send workers from one workplace to another, increasing the dangers of transmission of the virus for them and the people they care for.

Following the tragic deaths of the first wave, the questioning of homes managed for profit at the expense of the well-being of seniors was such that the Premier of Quebec felt it necessary to suggest that the government could possibly "nationalize" private long-term care homes. At about the same time, the Quebec Finance Minister asked the Centre for Interuniversity Research and Analysis on Organizations (CIRANO) to conduct a study on the place of health in the economic recovery of

Quebec.

Founded in 1994, CIRANO is subsidized by, among others, the Quebec government and its "partners" -- federal and Quebec institutions such as the Business Development Bank of Canada and the Caisse de dépôt et de placement du Québec -- and by a number of big private enterprises, such as BMO Financial Group, Manulife Financial Corporation, Power Corporation of Canada, Bell Canada and Rio Tinto.

Studies produced by this centre generally approach economic and social programs from the point of view of promoting the privatization of public services and social programs. Here are the titles of two such studies: "Public-private partnerships: an option to discover," and "The private sector within a public health care system: the French example." The aim of the latter is explicit, that is, to "put an end to the greatest obstacle to improving the Canadian and Quebec health care system, that is, the irrational opposition by a number of political and lobby groups to a more active and integrated role for health, insurance and direct supply institutions and enterprises, for profit or not for profit, in our health care system."

This is exactly the approach taken in the study commissioned by the Quebec government, published last September and entitled "Health care at the heart of the economic recovery in Quebec." On the matter of seniors' homes, casting aside all evidence to the contrary, the researchers state: "Government does not have the necessary means nor the expertise to take up the concept of seniors' homes on its own [...] By seniors' homes, we mean private apartment buildings destined to accommodate autonomous and semi-autonomous seniors [...] The private sector, for profit or not for profit, has the required infrastructure and competences needed to realize this project for seniors adapted to their health conditions."



Having declared that the government has neither the means nor the expertise, the authors of the report suggest that the government should nevertheless subsidize these private seniors' homes' medical equipment and services. In other words, public funds should be put at the disposal of private owners and their shareholders so that they can continue to make maximum profits on the backs of seniors, without themselves having to reinvest the monies extracted from seniors into the services they provide.

On the issue of health workers, having listed the existing problems in health care which are well-known, the authors of the report suggest as a "solution" the improvement of "work organization" through a set of strategies aimed at "optimizing the utilization and contribution of workers." These "strategies" generally amount to "doing more with less." They are precisely the strategies -- now being imposed through ministerial decree -- which have led to the present situation which is literally pushing frontline workers to the brink and allowing the relentless dismantling of the public health system. Largely due to the efforts of workers and their organizations to make their working conditions and the overall conditions in health care known, it can be predicted that these "strategies" will have tragic consequences for the well-being of the people. Clearly, the workers will have to step up their fight in order to defend their rights and the rights of all, as well as political organizing to put forward independent politics of their own which remove the system of party governance which serves the rich.

(Quotations translated from original French by WF. Photos: FIQ, F. Couto)



Education is a Right Podcast

Why Are Governments Allergic to Public Solutions to the Pandemic?



In this episode Dr. Shane Miersch, an antibody engineer in the Sidhu Laboratory at the University of Toronto, discusses the status of the lab's research for a publicly developed COVID-19 treatment. He also informs about the problem of governments refusing to develop public solutions to the pandemic which will prepare Canada for future outbreaks. Dr. Miersch specifically describes the experience he and his colleagues have had trying to get the federal government to recognize the value they are creating instead of handing out large amounts of public funds to private pharmaceutical monopolies that want to profit from the pandemic. Listen to the podcast [here](#).



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