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**Our Security Lies in Empowering the People  
Whose Fight Upholds the Rights of All**

## COVID Contagion in Montreal Schools



Montreal demonstration for a safe return to school in 2020 -- a year later schools return facing a fourth wave of COVID-19.

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## COVID Contagion in Montreal Schools

Quebec has begun using rapid testing to detect cases of COVID-19 in 72 schools in four targeted places in Montreal and Laval.

All four have a high number of active cases of COVID-19, including the Montreal neighbourhoods

of Parc-Extension, Saint-Michel and Montréal-Nord, as well as Chomedey in Laval.

About 20 per cent of schools in Quebec are reporting cases of COVID-19, which accounts for about 600 schools and more than 1,000 positive cases.



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## Escalating COVID-19 Crisis in Alberta

COVID-19 case counts continue to soar in Alberta. On September 13 Alberta reported 4,740 new cases of COVID-19 over the weekend, for a total of 18,395 active cases across Alberta, or 43 per cent of all active cases in Canada.



Hospitals are overwhelmed and ICUs are already operating far above capacity. Physicians, infectious disease specialists, and other health care workers and their unions are speaking out about the crisis and putting forward definite measures that must be taken.

The health care system is facing serious staff shortages compounded by the burnout, injuries and resignations as the government continues to attack the rights of the workers, including planned wage rollbacks and layoffs of thousands of workers. Edmonton has cancelled more than 70 per cent of all scheduled surgeries, while Calgary postponed all "elective" admissions. There is deep concern that the health care system will collapse if cases, hospital admissions and ICU admissions continue to double every 14 days as they are now doing.



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## Workers Must Take the Lead to Deal with State of Health Care System

- Peggy Morton -



Edmonton rally in support of health care workers, August 12, 2021

The United Conservative Party (UCP) government in Alberta is out of control, characterized by irrationality, chaos, revenge-seeking and total disregard for the people's well-being. The Premier, his Minister of Health and the Chief Medical Officer of Health disappeared for a month while the fourth wave surged.

The government refuses to take responsibility for falsely declaring the pandemic over, removing all health measures to contain COVID-19, and telling Albertans not to worry, that they would have the best summer ever. Instead the government is blaming those who followed its advice and failed to get a first or second vaccination. As always, the cards played are division, diversion and deception. The irresponsible actions of a small number of ideologically-driven people who harass patients and health care workers are being used to suggest that all actions, which would include the picket lines of the workers themselves, should not be permitted outside hospitals. According to this, problems are solved through police powers, not by providing them with viable solutions as decided by the people concerned.

Throughout the pandemic, workers have refused to be overwhelmed by feelings of helplessness in the face of a government which refuses to act to safeguard the people. Now more than ever is the time to uphold the stand that Our Security Lies in the Defence of the Rights of All! This is the time to once again take the lead, as workers have done throughout the pandemic.

Albertans have gone all out to take up social responsibility -- Protect Our Province (@POPAlberta) brings together doctors, scientists, ICU nurses, teachers and advocates for education and others and provides regular podcasts which give a wide range of information and advocacy for Albertans.

Support Our Students (SOS) took up responsibility to keep everyone informed about school outbreaks when the government failed to do so. More than 430,000 Albertans visited the tracker a total of four million times. SOS continues to organize to make schools safe at a time the Kenney government has abandoned even the responsibility for contact tracing in schools and does not report cases until at least 10 per cent of kids are affected. As well as putting forward comprehensive measures for schools, the site is a valuable resource for sharing the initiatives people are taking to protect our students.

Workers are refusing to submit to arbitrary measures in many forms. The Alberta Union of Provincial Employees (AUPE) has forced the Alberta government to back off its unreasonable return to worksite demand. Provincial government workers who have been working at home can now continue to do so. All the health care unions are standing firm against the demands for wage rollbacks and attacks on wages and working conditions and fighting to end privatization and solve the problems of understaffing.

Unions are indicating that if and when the government implements the outstanding sections of Bill 32, the UCP's omnibus anti-worker legislation passed in July 2020, they will not comply. These provisions require unions to seek approval from each and every union member for what are called "political activities and other causes" to be defined as whatever the government says they are.

Canadians stand with the health care workers. They are taking initiatives within their collectives to work out together what they can do to make their workplaces and communities safer. Do not permit the government to use the situation to impose more arbitrary police powers on the workers!

***Our Security Lies in the Fight for the Rights of All!***

(Photo: UNA)





# On the Situation Facing Ontario Public Sector Workers

- Interview, Fred Hahn, Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Ontario -



*Fred Hahn is the President of CUPE Ontario, which represents over 280,000 workers in health care, municipalities, school boards, social services and universities.*

**Workers' Forum:** Ontario hospital workers who have been on the front lines protecting people's health and safety in the conditions of the pandemic are now facing concessionary demands from the Ontario government and the Ontario Hospital Association. How do you assess this?

**Fred Hahn:** Actually the Ontario Hospital Association has tabled pages and pages of concessions.

During the pandemic, under the emergency orders, most of our members' collective agreements, not just those of hospital workers, were suspended. Employers were given *carte blanche* to reassign people, to change their shifts, to not pay overtime. It looks as if, based on some of the concessions that have been tabled, hospital employers like those things and want to make them permanent. The concessions they want are about job security, job posting provisions, shift requirements, overtime, many things that have been in the collective agreements for a long time but with which employers did not have to comply for months.

It appears that employers are trying to make changes which our hospital workers and those in the Service Employees International Union are not going to agree to. The emergency measures literally gave complete control to the employer. The employer could tell a worker that they would have to work 12 days in a row with no overtime payment, that they would be working in that location over there where they had never worked before. Employers were empowered to do such things and much more.

In our collective agreements we have job posting language that makes it clear when you apply for a job what the shifts are, where you work, that if you work extra you get overtime. If there is a reorganization of the work there are abundant procedures spelled out and there are job security provisions that relate to reorganizations. These are important. The employer wants to make changes

to some of those provisions, putting limits on workers' rights. All of their proposals are for concessions, and our members are not going to agree to them.

It is insulting to our workers. This is something that we have experienced in every sector. This round is about hospital workers whose central bargaining has just started. But we have seen this in municipal bargaining. We have seen it in social service bargaining. In every case in which employers have had enhanced rights in the pandemic, they are trying to bargain concessions to keep them.

I am happy to tell you that in every single round of bargaining in any sector in which an employer has tried to impose concessions we have successfully defeated them and we will do so in the hospital sector as well.

We have an additional problem in the current situation because of specific legislation passed by the Ford Conservatives, Bill 124, that imposes a restriction on collective bargaining, that dictates that increases in compensation must not exceed one per cent per year. This is not just about wages. All compensation is included in that one per cent.



For example, hospital workers are seeking improvements to language around personal protective equipment and safety at work. Those improvements are considered a cost. According to this law, if you bargain for enhanced safety measures that cost money, that would reduce your wage increase. Enhanced safety at work, enhanced staffing levels -- which is a real challenge in health care -- these are also considered costs that fall within the one per cent.

As another example, we are trying to negotiate paid sick days for part-time and casual workers. That alone, according to the government officials, is way more than one per cent. That is what the employer has said.



People are shocked when we tell them what is in the law. That is why it is so important that we are organizing, not just working out bargaining strategies, but that we get the word out, that we inform the public and make everyone aware of what this law means.

One of our most important demands is that Bill 124 be repealed because it is an attack against all public sector workers. In the meantime, during this round of bargaining, we are demanding that the bill be suspended. The government made changes many times during the pandemic, including providing for pandemic pay that was over \$1 an hour. They did that by regulation so they can do it again in this negotiation.

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

**FH:** After this year and a half of the pandemic, we are seeing a change in our members, in our neighbours and in workers generally. Workers, having been through the pandemic where they could literally lose their lives, are saying that enough is enough, that we have to do things differently in our workplaces. Collectively and individually, they realize their worth and that they deserve more. They do not want to go back to conditions where their health, including their mental health, are not looked after, where wages are insufficient and they are not treated with respect.

For example, for more than a decade our union has spoken out about long-term care, against privatization, about the need to get rid of profit in seniors' care. Now there is much more awareness about this problem, more energy. Our job is to channel that energy and realize the possibility of bringing about significant changes.

(Photos: OCHU, SEIU)



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## BC Hospitality Workers Ratify Hard Fought New Contract with Hospitality Employers



The union representing hospitality workers in hotels, motels, pubs and liquor stores in 14 communities in BC, UNITE HERE Local 40, announced in a press release on September 13 that a new four-year collective agreement with Hospitality Industrial Relations (HIR) has been reached. Workers voted 80 per cent in favour of the new agreement. The new contract covers over 1,000 hospitality workers in Vancouver, Victoria, Coquitlam, Richmond, New Westminister, North Vancouver, Abbotsford, Harrison Hot Springs, Kamloops, Castlegar, Port Alberni, Mackenzie, Prince Rupert, and Fort St. John.

Since the beginning of the pandemic it has been known that recall rights in the collective agreement and under the province's *Labour Standards Act* were insufficient to protect workers' jobs in the conditions of extended closures of businesses. While a few employers agreed to extend recall rights so that workers would be able to return to their jobs when businesses reopened, most did not.

The union reports that "This contract includes an extension of recall rights for the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic -- through to July 1, 2023 or when the World Health Organization (WHO) declares the pandemic is over. After an 18-month effort, BC's hospitality workers, represented by UNITE HERE Local 40, have achieved a new standard securing the right of workers to return to their jobs as business recovers... As well as winning unlimited recall rights to cover future crises such as pandemics and natural disasters, they won longer recall protection for regular seasonal



layoffs, increasing from six months to 12." Workers also defeated attempts by employers to force concessions and the agreement protects pension, health care, severance pay and workload provisions previously negotiated.

This victory was won through sustained militant actions by workers in many communities with rallies and pickets and a hunger strike at the legislature in August 2020. They called on the NDP government to extend the recall period provided in the *Labour Standards Act* not just for themselves but for thousands of workers in a similar situation. To their shame government ministers and MLAs refused to meet with the workers and did not lift a finger or speak a word in support of their just demands.

The greater the public awareness of the unjust actions of employers and the just cause of the workers, the greater the public support. City Councils in New Westminster, Burnaby and Victoria passed motions in support of the workers' demands and withdrew their business from hotels that did not guarantee workers' jobs on reopening. The BC Federation of Labour did the same. Municipal and federal politicians, union leaders and workers from many unions joined the hospitality workers' rallies and pickets.

Stephanie Fung, a spokesperson for UNITE HERE Local 40 told *Workers Forum* that the union is relieved and excited at the successful conclusion of bargaining with HIR and said that this success was due to all the actions of the workers themselves. She said that negotiations continue with some of the other ten hotels that are not part of the HIR to guarantee workers' recall rights and settle contracts. She said "if HIR can agree to protect the workers there is no reason the other ten can't, so we will keep on fighting."

*Workers' Forum* congratulates the BC hospitality workers and their union for this success in their determined and principled fight for their rights and the rights of all workers. We stand with the workers at the hotels not covered by this agreement where the fight for the workers' rights continues.

(Photos: UNITE HERE Local 40)



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## **BC Governments Sell-Off of Public Lands to Powerful Private Interests**

**- K.C. Adams -**

BC cartel party governments sold off 164 BC schools, health centres and hospitals, and agricultural and industrial lots between 2013 and 2019. The sell-off program called the "Release of Assets for Economic Generation" began with the Liberal Party government in power in 2013, and continued with the NDP/Green Party coalition government in 2017, although it changed the name of the program to "Surplus Public Properties," and still exists with the NDP majority government today. In 2019, the "Surplus Public Properties" list included 69 properties. The sell-off of public property continued despite Jinny Sims of the NDP/Green Party coalition government stating in a 2019 *Vancouver Sun* article, "It is increasingly difficult to find affordable land in BC's fastest-growing cities to build new public infrastructure."

In the six year period from 2013 to 2019, which forms the basis of a Postmedia investigation, the market value of the public lands sold off exceeded one billion dollars.

The sell-off of public property reveals several issues of particular concern:

- the private buyers in many cases made outsized profits in short order after they purchased the

public property;

- private developers used their influence on municipal councils to subdivide the large public land parcels they bought leading to immediate dramatic increases in the land value;
- some of the public property was resold at much higher prices on the same day as the initial purchase from the government;
- some of the buyers of public property made large contributions to the Liberal and NDP cartel parties that were or became the party governments selling the public land;
- some of the public property after being sold as "surplus" was immediately leased back from the buyer by the government in power for years on end;
- the sell-off of schools and hospitals was done even though the population in BC is growing and the province is lacking facilities and land on which to build, especially schools and health centres.

Vancouver health centres, North Shore schools, and acres of agricultural land in Surrey are among the 164 pieces of public property deemed "surplus" and sold during the six years. By 2019, the Ministry of Education had 48 fewer properties, many of them former schools in cities such as Salmon Arm, Langley and Nanaimo. A dozen health-related properties are now gone, including hospitals, medical centres and a Vancouver ambulance station, along with recreational areas, city lots and large and small acreages of industrial land. Prices per sale ranged from \$16,000 to \$217 million with the government using the \$1 billion it received as general revenue.

Sales were throughout BC including:

Surrey -- 21

Prince George -- 15

Delta -- eight

Burnaby and Salmon Arm -- seven each

North Vancouver and New Westminster -- six each

The sell-off of public property to private interests in BC was done legally according to existing business law. It should be noted the practice is not unusual with all BC cartel parties engaging in the practice once in government. Over 1,500 such transactions occurred between 1981 and 2018. Many details of particular sell-offs could be characterized as corruption as described in subsequent parts of this series but as everything is legal according to existing law the corruption is "perfectly legal" even though immoral and contrary to the public interest.

*To be continued -- Part Two: Sell-Off of Public Property and Subsequent Soaring Property Values and Profit for Buyers*

*(With files from 2019 Postmedia investigation in the Vancouver Sun, "Sold on your behalf: 164 BC schools and hospitals, agricultural and industrial lots worth \$1 billion.")*

