

Alberta health care workers end "illegal" strike

Provincial Tory government to press ahead with dismantling of Medicare

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More than 10,000 Alberta health care workers returned to work yesterday, bringing a swift end to one of the largest and potentially most explosive strikes in Alberta history. In a powerful display of militancy and solidarity, the workers had walked off the job May 24 in defiance of the province's reactionary labor laws and a court injunction that threatened them with punitive fines and even jailing. But the Alberta Union of Public Employees (AUPE) ended the strike less than 48 hours later, seizing on modest concessions offered by the Provincial Health Authorities of Alberta and its political master, the Tory provincial government of Ralph Klein, to proclaim victory.

What gave the strike such an explosive potential was that it erupted just days after the passage of the Tories' Bill 11, legislation that opens the door to the dismantling of Medicare, Canada's universal, free public health care system. But the union never sought to make the strike the spearhead of a political mobilization of working people in defence of public health care. Rather it confined the health care workers' struggle within the narrow framework of a collective bargaining dispute and even welcomed and praised Klein's intervention in the strike.

The Alberta strike is only the latest in a series of lost and derailed struggles involving health care workers. The withdrawal of state funding for Medicare has given rise to a wave of job actions by health care workers over the past 18 months, including last summer's Quebec nurses' strike. Although these strikes have undoubtedly caused hardship to patients and their families and have in most cases been declared illegal by

the government and courts, they have won broad public support. The unions, however, have contained and quarantined these struggles, limiting the workers' demands to contractual issues that leave governments' budgetary framework and the dismantling of public services unchallenged and terminating the strikes when they threatened the political legitimacy of big business governments.

The Alberta strike involved licensed practical nurses (LPNs), ambulance attendants, hospital support staff and others at 159 health facilities across the province. Some registered nurses, members of the United Nurses of Alberta, and some hospital workers who are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees, also briefly walked off the job in a show of sympathy.

All but 1,200 of the strikers were deemed "essential" under Alberta's restrictive labor legislation and therefore legally barred from striking. The remaining 1,200 were put in an illegal strike position by the government's appointment of a "board of inquiry" last Tuesday.

Under the settlement accepted by union negotiators Thursday afternoon and approved by the rank and file in hastily organized ratification votes later the same day, the workers will receive pay increases of between 8 and 16 percent over the next two years. The union had asked for a 21.5 percent pay increase.

After the increases, Alberta LPNs will remain lower paid than their counterparts in the other four of Canada's five largest provinces. By 2001 an Alberta LPN's wage will rise from \$15.07 to \$17.35 per hour,

but in Ontario, Canada's most populous province, LPN's already earn more than \$20 per hour. Nurses aides and many of the other health care workers will receive much smaller increases both in percentage and real terms. Under the new contract, the wage of a nurses' aide will rise by less than a dollar per hour, to \$13.07 from \$12.22.

In 1993-94, the Klein government rolled back health care workers' wages by 5 percent. Although much of the rollback was subsequently restored, inflation left many of the AUPE health care workers earning 15 percent less in real terms than at the beginning of the 1990s.

Alberta is currently posting huge budget surpluses, yet even following the strike many workers will still be earning less in real terms than they did a decade ago, and their work has grown more demanding due to budget and staffing cuts.

The other key issue in the negotiations was contracting out, which will take on growing significance with the broadening of private health care under Bill 11. Here too the union made a major concession, although it had stipulated that its demand for a ban on contracting-out was not negotiable. Under the new contract, health care facilities guaranteed not to resort to contracting out only for the first 18 months.

Clearly fearful of too closely identifying themselves with the settlement, leaders of two of the four bargaining units did not explicitly call for the contract's ratification, claiming they would leave it up to their members to decide.

In line with the recommendations of a mediators' report, which became the basis for the proposed settlement, the Health Authorities of Alberta agreed not to press charges of contempt of court against individual strikers. But charges are to proceed against the AUPE and its executive. AUPE President Dan MacLennan has already been served with a summons for disobeying the court order. In 1988, the 17,000-member union was fined \$400,000 for contempt of court for an illegal strike which lasted 19 days.

A darling of Canada's political right, Premier Ralph Klein has made no secret of his virulent hostility to unions, most recently during the ongoing strike against the *Calgary Herald*. Yet Klein took a relatively restrained stand in respect to the health care workers' strike, even expressing his support for the workers

receiving increases beyond the Health Authorities' "final offer."

Clearly, his concern was that the strike not become a rallying point for opposition to his health care privatization plans. The cynically named Alberta Health Care Protection Act or Bill 11 has provoked widespread public protest in Alberta in recent months. Despite Klein's claims that his government stands for the principles of Medicare, Bill 11 allows for many surgical procedures to be performed by for-profit, private hospitals. Although federal Health Minister Alan Rock intimated Ottawa might challenge Bill 11's legality, he recently declared the new law to be in accordance with the federal Canada Health Act, opening the door for other provincial governments such as the Ontario Conservative government to follow suit.

Altogether, provincial health care budgets have been cut by \$30 billion over the last decade. Much of the cuts are the result of the massive reductions the Chretien Liberal government has made in transfers to the provinces. The Klein government of Alberta, however, has been the most aggressive in promoting privatization as the solution to the crisis precipitated by the withdrawal of state funding for Medicare.

Premier Klein was attending a conference of the premiers of Canada's western provinces and territories in Brandon, Manitoba while the health care strike unfolded in Alberta. At the conference, Klein sharply rebuked the NDP premiers of British Columbia and Saskatchewan for daring to criticize Bill 11. "Basically, the long and the short of it is, as I told you guys, go home, mind your own business, look at your own legislation and stay out of ours," declared Klein. While the NDP Premiers have warned Bill 11 threatens to create a two-tier health system, Canada's social democrats have been complicit in the cuts to health care. Saskatchewan's NDP Premier Roy Romanow has called for a royal commission to determine which services currently covered under the Canada Health Act could be eliminated, and which should be left as "core" provisions.



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