

Canada: State assault on public sector workers

Strikes illegalized, wages and jobs slashed

David Adelaide
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On Canada's Atlantic and Pacific coasts, right-wing provincial governments have introduced draconian legislation this week to break strikes by public sector workers and impose massive wage and job cuts.

In Newfoundland, the Tory provincial government introduced legislation Monday to force an end to a four-week-old strike by a total of 20,000 civil servants and hospital, highway maintenance and other public sector workers. Bill 18 explicitly threatens any worker with dismissal who refuses to return to work on the terms dictated by the Tories. It also provides for massive fines to be levied against union leaders and the two unions involved in the dispute should they not instruct their members to return to work.

The legislation imposes a contract that freezes the workers' wages for the next two years and provides for annual increases of just 2 and 3 percent in the final years of a four-year contract. The government-dictated contract also halves the number of sick days.

When the threat of back-to-work legislation was first raised, leaders of the Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Public and Private Employees (NAPE) and the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) indicated they would counsel defiance. "In the event that [Premier Danny Williams] resorts to the legislature," NAPE President Leo Puddister told a union rally, "I will say to [union] members that you should not go back to work."

However, no sooner was Bill 18 tabled than the union leadership changed its tune. Although the bill is still before the Newfoundland legislature, NAPE and CUPE have ordered their members to return to work, and as of Thursday all picket lines had been taken down. Puddister and the union leadership have attempted to

present this capitulation as a piece of cunning maneuvering that will undermine the legitimacy of the government-imposed settlement. Emboldened by the unions' capitulation, Williams has agreed to delay passage of the legislation until next Monday, in the hopes that the unions will, for at most a few crumbs, tell their members to swallow the government's terms.

The draconian stance of the Tory government was entirely predictable. One of the Tories' first actions upon taking office last fall was to impose a spending freeze. This was followed shortly thereafter by a public-sector wage and hiring freeze. Immediately before the start of the strike, the government tabled a budget that calls for a thousand public sector jobs to be cut in the 2004-2005 fiscal year and a total of 4,000 to be eliminated over the next four years.

In British Columbia, the Liberal government of Gordon Campbell adopted a strikebreaking law early Thursday morning that is even more draconian than that of the Newfoundland Tories. Not only does the BC legislation order the immediate end to a four-day-old strike by 43,000 health care workers; it imposes on them an 11 percent pay cut and a one-and-a-half-hour increase in the workweek. The lengthening of the workweek is equal to a further 4 percent cut in pay—for a total wage cut of 15 percent. Last but not least, the government-imposed contract gives the province's health boards the unfettered right to contract out the hospital workers' jobs. According to the government, the wage cut and increase in the workweek alone will reduce its labor costs by C\$200 million a year.

Thursday's law is only the latest volley in the Liberals' assault on public and social services—a campaign that goes hand-in-hand with their push to

slash corporate and personal income taxes. In 2002, the Liberals passed legislation, Bill 29, that rewrote the health care workers' existing collective agreements to eliminate all restrictions on the contracting out of work. Since then, some 6,000 health care workers have been laid off and, during the four months of negotiations that preceded this week's strike, a further 2,500 hospital workers were given lay-off notices.

Patricia Jense, a housekeeper at a hospital in Victoria, B.C., who was recently laid off, told the CBC: "There are people with like 27, 30 years [seniority]—and we're being chucked out like a piece of meat—thrown out on the street."

Most of the strikers—who include orderlies, cafeteria and cleaning staff, and technicians—are represented by the Health Employees Union (HEU). Nurses respected the hospital workers' picket lines for the strike's first four days, but once the Liberals rushed their antiunion legislation into law, the British Columbia Nurses Union (BCNU) instructed its members to return to work.

Yesterday, hospital workers remained off the job in defiance of the Liberals' strikebreaking legislation. To resounding cheers, HEU leader Chris Allnut told a rally of hospital workers outside Vancouver General Hospital that they should not report for work: "I want to be perfectly clear what the union is instructing members to do.... You are to respect the protest lines until we decide that you should go back to work."

Allnut's wording makes it clear that the issue for the union leadership is not if, but when, it will capitulate. The HEU has offered no strategy to broaden the strike, let alone called for the political and industrial mobilization of the working class in B.C. and across Canada in defence of public health care and the jobs and wages of the workers who administer it. On the contrary, the union leadership has repeatedly said it is ready to accept some contracting out, and in a clear signal that it is preparing to terminate the hospital workers' struggle, has ceased calling their job action a strike, referring to it instead as a "protest."



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