Alberta mounts sweeping attack on workers' rights

Keith Jones
7 December 2013

Alberta's Conservative government rammed two draconian anti-worker laws through the provincial legislature this past week, as part of its drive to cut public sector workers' wages and pensions and slash the services that they administer.

Bill 45, the *Public Sector Services Continuation Act*, drastically increases the penalties for public sector workers, unions, and union officials who participate in an "illegal" strike and makes it a crime for anyone to threaten an "illegal" strike or urge public sector workers to mount one.

Under Alberta law more than 100,000 Alberta provincial public sector workers, including civil servants, nurses, hospital and other health care workers, and college and university faculty are legally barred from striking.

Henceforth, workers will lose an additional day's pay for each day they are off work due to an "illegal" work stoppage. Unions will be automatically docked $250,000 for each day of strike, with a further $50 penalty for each bargaining-unit member—meaning that some unions could face fines of $1 million for each day of a strike.

Bill 45 also runs roughshod over the right to free speech by making it a crime punishable by a $500 fine to make a "strike threat" or encourage workers to engage in an illegal strike.

As union officials are already threatened under other labor code provisions, this measure appears specifically designed to intimidate and muzzle rank-and-file workers and others not part of the union apparatus.

Bill 45 also redefines the term "strike" so as to render work-to-rule campaigns or any other form of job-action short of a walkout illegal and subject to Bill 45's draconian anti-strike provisions.

Bill 46, the *Public Salary Restraint Act*, will impose a four-year concessionary contract on 22,000 members of the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees (AUPE) unless their union accepts the government's contract demands by the end of next month. Under the government-dictated contract, the wages of the AUPE members will be frozen for the first two years and in the third and fourth years they will be increased by just 1 percent per year.

Underscoring its determination to ram through these bills, Premier Alison Redford's Conservative government used its legislative majority to impose "closure"—thereby allowing only a truncated, pro forma debate on Bills 45 and 46—even before the bills were tabled in the provincial parliament.

The message is clear, other unions set to negotiate new contracts —such as the Health Sciences Association of Alberta, which represents 22,000 public sector workers—will have to "voluntarily" agree to contracts imposing a cut in their members' real wages or the government will impose them by legislative fiat.

By strengthening the penalties for public sector workers' strikes, the government is also strengthening its hand to force through massive cuts in the pensions of all Alberta public and para-public employees, including teachers and municipal workers. In September, the government announced that early in the new year it will unilaterally impose cuts to the province's four public sector pension plans, scrapping negotiations with the unions in favor of a bogus "consultation process". The Conservatives' September announcement said that government's pension contributions are to be capped and pension rates frozen until 2021, annual cost-of-living allowances are to be reduced and paid only if the plans' finances permit, and beginning in 2015 no one who retires before age 65 shall be entitled to a full pension irrespective of their

© World Socialist Web Site

years of service.

The unions have responded to the Conservative's assault on their members' rights and living standards with a token display of opposition, including a series of protest rallies outside the provincial legislature.

The political thrust of their campaign has been aimed at convincing the government and big business that the unions play a "constructive role" in containing worker discontent.

They have emphasized the rarity of illegal public strikes and urged the Conservatives to keep the bills in abeyance pending the government's convening of a task force on labour relations in the province.

In the 2012 provincial election, the Alberta Federation of Labour (AFL) and many of its affiliates threw their support to the Conservatives, claiming that this was the only way to prevent the Wild Rose Party, a rightwing split-off from the Conservatives, from winning power.

The unions claimed the Conservatives constituted a "progressive" alternative to Wild Rose—no matter that this rightwing party, which has governed oil-rich Alberta since 1971, has made it the country's most socially-polarized province, with the lowest minimum wages and worst work standards outside of the impoverished Atlantic provinces. The rich, meanwhile, benefit from the country's only "lax" income-tax and the corporations from low taxes and law environmental regulation.

Now in response to Bills 45 and 46, the unions are vowing to "punish" the Conservatives at the polls in 2016. "The coalition that elected Alison Radford is dead," AFL President Gil McGowan told a news conference Thursday. Declaring that Radford is "definitely not a progressive," McGowan vowed, "We will not be fooled again."

With this bluster, the unions are planning to channel workers behind other big business politicians, in the first instance the Liberals and New Democrats. But the AFL has even welcomed the Wild Rose's House leader and Finance critic Rob Anderson onto its platforms after the party postured as an opponent of some of the provisions of Bill 45 and 46.

In addition to seeking to quell demands for working class action to defeat the Conservatives' attack on workers' rights by promoting illusions in Radford's electoral rivals, the unions are urging workers to put their faith in a court challenge to the constitutionality of Bills 45 and 46.

Over the past three decades, the courts have played a pivotal role in the assault on the working class, sanctioning a volley of laws—passed by parties of every political stripe from the Conservatives, to the Parti Quebecois and NDP—that have frozen or cut workers' wages and criminalized strikes.

In May 2011, Canada's Supreme Court ruled that the right to association in Canada's Charter of Rights does not entail any collective bargaining rights, let alone the right of workers to strike. It merely gives workers the right, said the Court, to have an organization through which to make their grievances known to their employers. Employers, are constitutionally obligated to hear the workers' complaints, but are not obliged to conduct negotiations with their representatives, let alone address their grievances.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site