

Letter on growing social polarization and class conflict in Alberta

8 March 2014

The WSWs received the following letter from an Alberta public sector worker that places the recent provincial Conservative government laws attacking public sector workers in a broader context of growing social polarization and class conflict

I am an Alberta public servant.

I read the WSWS daily, as do many Albertans, and I rely on the excellent analysis it contains regarding the attacks being waged against working people globally and what we can do to fight back. Like the public sector workers in Detroit or Greece or any other place, our pensions and wages and social services are under attack.

22,000 government workers have been without a contract since March 2013. The union was given binding arbitration decades ago “in return” for legislation banning its right to strike. However, in the closing days of the autumn sitting of the legislature, the provincial government rammed through two anti-worker bills in days with no notice or consultation, and used its majority to sharply curtail debate.

Last month, a provincial judge put this controversial legislation, which prevents public sector workers from bargaining collectively and striking and imposes huge fines on strikers, on hold. He said a compelling case had been made that the law violates workers’ Charter [constitutional] rights to freedom of association and that it demonstrated the government’s bad faith during the collective bargaining process itself.

That didn’t stop Alberta’s Conservative Premier Allison Redford. Following the ruling she said, “We believe the legislation we passed is appropriate. We are confident in the legislation. We’ll be appealing (Judge Thomas’) decision and we are taking all necessary steps to do that.”

Redford has established quite a reputation for spending most of her time out of the province on expensive trade junkets, for having her personal staff all quit within 6 months of being hired, of ramming legislation through in all-night sessions, of not giving opposition parties the government’s press releases before the press gets them, and of passing draconian omnibus legislation which gives all power to the minister and allows him to do whatever he

wants through regulations. With this latest assault on public sector workers’ right to bargain and strike, Redford has taken a page out of Maggie Thatcher’s play book, reminiscent of the fines imposed on unions who helped the Miners during their strike in 1985.

Alberta is often held up as the ray of light in the black hole of the Canadian economy. Well, is it?

Aboriginal people, people with disabilities, recent immigrants, visible minorities and women living in Alberta are more likely to experience entrenched poverty. Alberta has the highest number of domestic violence incidents in any Canadian province. The shelters are full. These abusive, often mentally ill, people are not being treated and many domestic murders occur. Edmonton, the provincial capital, is often bleakly referred to as “Deadmonton.”

If you want to deal with meeting basic human needs you need resources.

Alberta has no sales tax, low corporate taxes and the lowest provincial personal income tax of any Canadian jurisdiction, a regressive flat 10 percent income tax. It is a tax haven for the rich! Who cares about the poor?!

The Conservative federal government of Stephen Harper, which holds virtually every parliamentary seat in Alberta, has reduced the marginal effective corporate tax rate paid by companies operating in Canada from 26 percent to 16 percent since 2010 and gutted all federal public services carrying out mass layoffs and shutting down virtually all federal scientific work, including environmental monitoring, basic demographic studies and archaeological research.

Federal libraries and archives have also been decimated and much of the valuable data has been “lost” or discarded, including Statistics Canada census data. Meanwhile, funding for religious groups has increased. The promotion of religious obscurantism combined with the attack on scientific research will have huge social repercussions on development of global warming policy, and overall social policy for years to come.

Recently seniors protested the planned introduction of means testing to seniors’ drug programs by occupying Alberta government offices and were forcefully removed by

the RCMP. No universal benefits programs are left. The children, the old and the impoverished are being told the pie is shrinking and they cannot have forks. Shame, shame on you, Allison Redford!

The City of Edmonton's population is projected to grow by 50 percent in the next 5 years due to the influx of migrant workers from other parts of the country, yet the elite says there is no money for infrastructure. The Edmonton Public School Board just announced that it is now going to bus students an hour each way to school, even six year-old children in kindergarten, in order to cope with the lack of space in local schools.

If you are employed, how do you fare as a worker in Alberta? The 2009 report "Poverty Costs: An Economic Case for a Preventative Poverty Reduction Strategy in Alberta" reported "Alberta has a higher debt-to-income ratio than the Canadian average, 143 percent compared with 127 percent nationally, and is experiencing increasing income disparity, which is associated with growing poverty and growing social costs. Deteriorating health and mental health, decreasing trust among citizens, and increased spending on health and justice systems are all measurable outcomes of poverty and greater inequality."

Many persons in Alberta with disabilities face higher costs associated with customized assistive equipment, supplies and non-prescription medications that are not always covered by public programs. The Redford government cut payment under the Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH) in the last provincial budget. This is criminal!

Canada ranks 17th out of 24 "developed" countries on child poverty. More than 73,000 Alberta children, 34,000 of whom are below the age of 6, live in poverty. There is no measure that can ever capture the experience of living in poverty in terms of lost dignity, lost potential, suffering and injustice. In 2009 nearly 400,000 Albertans lived in poverty. The poverty rate has not significantly changed in the last 5 years; in fact, the income gap ratio is increasing, which suggests that low-income Albertans continue to fall further behind.

Premier Redford and her buddy from Calgary, Prime Minister Stephen Harper, don't want this information to get out. The Low-Income Cut-Off (known as the LICO) is the oldest and most established measure of low-income in Canada, dating back to 1967. It represents a threshold "below which families devote a larger share of income to the necessities of food, shelter, and clothing than the average family would" (Statistics Canada, 2011). Thanks to Stephen Harper's brutal cuts to Federal public services in general and his virtual elimination of many government scientific programs in particular, Statistics Canada no longer collects

the data necessary to update these spending patterns.

According to the National Council of Welfare, in 2010 persons with disabilities earn amongst the lowest incomes in Alberta at just 51.7 percent of the LICO! Aboriginal groups have a long history of poverty resulting from perpetual oppression, racism, displacement and political deadlock, which have prevented access to employment, education and social justice.

While many recent immigrants may be highly educated they routinely face barriers to gainful employment because their credentials are not recognized and because draconian labour laws allow them to be super-exploited and paid less.

On February 8th, 2014, the Edmonton Ironworkers Local 720 reported that about 80 members were let go from their construction jobs at the Kearl oil-sands mine near Fort McMurray and immediately replaced by temporary foreign workers on lower pay. Protests caused the men to be rehired within the week. I spoke to members of local 720 who are friends of mine and they were enraged because this sort of thing is regularly used to promote racism against immigrant workers and to divide the working class on these big industrial projects. Everyone should be making a decent wage, regardless of country of origin.

And I won't go into the environmental devastation caused by the oil sands, the pipelines that seem to span across virtually every acre of this province, the spills, the chemical air or the devastating impact of industrial farming, such as GMO crops and cancer causing pesticides in water tables.

I hope you get the picture now. Alberta is ruled by a vicious capitalist class who will stop at nothing to protect their privileged social position. Even when these capitalists' profit levels are sky-rocketing the attacks on the working class don't let up. It is high time we organized a world socialist government to end this misery once and for all. As Rosa Luxemburg said, the choice is socialism or barbarism. Thank you to everyone who makes the WSWS possible.

JB, Edmonton



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact