

Nova Scotia Liberals slash public sector workers' wages

Janet Browning
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Hundreds of teachers, hospital workers, civil servants and other public sector workers demonstrated outside the Nova Scotia legislature at its reopening last Thursday to protest a provincial Liberal law that slashes the real wages of 75,000 public sector workers.

For close to two years, Stephen McNeil's Liberal government had been using Bill 148 to bully public sector workers into accepting concessionary contracts. But last month, it went a step further and had the legislation, which had been rushed through the provincial legislature in December 2015, proclaimed into law.

Under Bill 148, provincial public sector workers, including low-paid health care workers, are subjected to a four-year wage "restraint" program. This consists of a two-year wage freeze and increases totaling no more than 3 percent in the two subsequent years. When inflation is taken into account, this translates into a substantial real-wage cut and one whose impact will likely last well beyond four years.

Bill 148 also retroactively suspends the "public service award," a lump sum bonus paid to workers after 10 years of service, and abolishes it for new hires.

First elected in 2013, by exploiting popular anger over the austerity measures of Darrel Dexter's NDP government, McNeil and his Liberals predictably continued the attack on working people, with further social spending cuts.

Last May, the Liberals narrowly won re-election on a platform that sought to dress up pro-big business policies, including corporate tax cuts and reduced taxes for the well-to-do, behind pledges of tax relief for working people.

No sooner was he re-elected than McNeil signaled his government would press forward with its plans to force wage-cutting contracts on all public sector workers,

declaring, "We are going to continue to live within our means."

Several smaller unions buckled under the government's threats to enact Bill 148 and prevailed on their members to accept "negotiated" contracts that incorporated the government's wage restraint program in full.

The Liberals originally brought forward Bill 148 in December 2015 in response to a rank-and-file revolt of the province's 9,300 public school teachers who had twice rejected tentative agreements recommended by the Nova Scotia Teachers' Union.

Ultimately, after teachers had rejected a third union-endorsed agreement, the Liberals imposed contracts on them in February 2017, by legislative fiat under another anti-worker law, Bill 75. The imposed four-year contracts included the two-year wage freeze and annual increases of 1.5 percent in the final two years.

The Liberals decided to enact Bill 148 last month after the province's largest union, the 30,000-member Nova Scotia Government and General Employees Union (NSGEU), had unilaterally surrendered civil servants' right to strike by requesting that their collective agreement be determined by binding arbitration.

Under Bill 148, arbitrators are forced to apply the government's wage-cutting "restraint" program.

On the part of the unions, last Thursday's protest was a pro forma affair. As exemplified by the actions of the teachers' union, they have been desperate to avoid any worker challenge to the Liberal government, to the point of seeking to impose its real-wage cuts on a hostile membership.

No sooner had the Liberals passed their anti-teacher Bill 75, than the teachers' union called off even a work-to-rule campaign, saying it was up to individual

teachers to continue the action if they wanted.

Faced with worker demands that they fight the government, the unions have quickly doused any and all suggestions of strike action. Instead, they have said they will challenge Bill 75 and now Bill 148 in the capitalist courts.

Throughout, the union bureaucracy's principal concern has been that the government not circumvent their role as worker "bargaining agent." Thus, Nova Scotia Nurses' Union President Janet Hazelton seems less concerned that her members, already overtaxed by years of cuts to health care, will now be subjected to wage cuts, than that the union apparatus is being bypassed. "We've often had concessions in bargaining," said Hazelton. "We've often had takeaways in bargaining, but we've negotiated that. We have made decisions. That's what bargaining is about, and this takes away that."

In April 2014, McNeil's government illegalized a brief nurses' strike, adopting legislation requiring all health sector unions to reach essential services agreements with their employers before any job action can legally take place.

The trade union-backed NDP claims to be opposed to Bill 148, but has joined the unions in suppressing any genuine struggle against it.

Nova Scotia NDP leader Gary Burrill, a United Church minister who was hailed as a "socialist" by the pseudo-left groups when he became leader, has applauded Justin Trudeau's federal Liberal government's economic policies. "The answer the federal Liberals gave in their last budget and in their last platform was the right one," Burrill stated. The Trudeau government's budget welcomed so enthusiastically by Burrill included plans to privatize vast swathes of public infrastructure and maintained the reactionary fiscal framework imposed by successive Canadian governments through public spending cuts and tax handouts to the rich.

Nova Scotia's first-ever NDP government worked within this framework, slashing social programs and raising the provincial sales taxes and other charges, so as to table three balanced budgets between 2009 and 2013.

During the election campaign last spring, Burrill offered the NDP as a partner for the other two big business parties if parliamentary arithmetic required it.

"If it should turn out that there's a potential minority government situation that requires greater levels of co-operation,...we're always interested," said Burrill.

The Nova Scotia Liberals are close allies of Justin Trudeau's federal Liberal government, which enjoys a close partnership with the unions, even as it continues the ruling elite's austerity agenda and expands the aggressive, militarist foreign policy of the previous Harper Conservative government. In fact, Liberal governments in Ontario, Quebec, and throughout Atlantic Canada, all of which have strong ties to the federal Liberals, have specialized in collaborating closely with the union bureaucracy to ram through attacks on public sector workers and cuts to social spending. They have also regularly moved to outlaw worker struggles, such as the construction workers' strike in Quebec last May and the Nova Scotia teachers' dispute.



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