Canada: Five thousand public sector workers strike in Saskatchewan

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After a four day work-to-rule campaign, 5,000 workers at six Saskatchewan Crown corporations and one Crown agency went on strike Friday against the provincial government's derisory contract offer. The proposed five-year deal would result in a significant cut in workers' real wages.

The strike is the largest job action to hit the province in decades. It involves workers represented by Unifor at SaskPower, SaskTel, SaskWater, SaskEnergy, the Water Security Agency and two SaskTel subsidiaries.

Provincial negotiators answering to the right-wing government of Saskatchewan Party Premier Scott Moe have offered a contract that would see workers saddled with a zero percent wage rise for the first two years, 1 percent in the third year, 2 percent in the fourth year and 2 percent (for some) in the fifth year. With the province's inflation rate currently running at 2 percent and rising, the government's contract offer would result in a significant reduction in Crown workers' purchasing power. Management has also sought to increase contracting out at the various companies.

Since 2007, management at Saskatchewan's government-owned corporations have received salary increases at more than twice the rate of the workforce.

Unifor negotiators have responded by proposing meager 2 percent increases over each of the first three years, followed by lump sum payments equaling 2 percent in the concluding years.

An Essential Services Act brought in by the Saskatchewan Party government in 2015 requires that prior to a strike employers and unions in the public sector agree on the number of "essential" employees who are required to report for work during a job stoppage. As a result, some important posts are still being staffed by Unifor members, who are working alongside managers performing the work of the strikers.

The first version of the Saskatchewan Party government's essential services legislation, the 2008 Public Service Essential Services Act, had sought to effectively ban strikes by declaring a huge section of the public sector workforce "essential." So egregious was that legislation, it was overturned by the Supreme Court and then modified by the government with its 2015 law.

The province has signaled that the strike may be a long one, by cutting all communications with the union bargaining team a week ago. With Unifor strike pay at a paltry $300 per week, management is banking on growing economic hardship breaking the resolve of workers. At SaskPower, management last week posted a provocative notice meant to encourage strike-breaking. "Legally, any individual can choose to cross a picket line and go to work," said the message. "If they choose to do so, employees within the striking union can continue to work during the strike."

For years the Saskatchewan Party government has drained the Crown corporations of their profits in order to backstop budget deficits created by its earlier tax cuts to corporations and the wealthy. The party came to power in 2007 after massive popular disaffection with the New Democratic Party, which, during 16 years in government, had closed 52 medical facilities and over 100 schools, and come into bitter conflict with public sector workers and nurses.

Premier Moe's attempt to foist a concessions-filled agreement on the Crown corporation workers is tied to his government's drive to meet its 2019 and 2020 deficit targets. Saskatchewan Party governments, which for years have appointed its supporters to the boards of publicly-owned companies, has pursued privatization schemes throughout provincial infrastructure. It has been estimated that in the last decade over $1.1 billion in public assets have been eliminated and at least 1,200 jobs outsourced. Moe is an advocate of the further dismantling of Canada's public health system via privatization.

Since he succeeded Brad Wall as provincial premier in 2018, Moe has intensified the government's austerity drive in order to deal with a growing budget shortfall exacerbated by retrenchment in the oil industry. Further cuts to public sector jobs have ensued.

The anti-worker policies in Saskatchewan are of a piece with a growing assault on the working class across the country and internationally. In Ontario, the much-hated regime of Premier Doug Ford has slashed social programs as have the new provincial governments in Alberta and Quebec.

There is mounting resistance to these attacks. Today, 55,000 Ontario public and state-funded school support-staff are slated to launch a province-wide strike, challenging the government's savage education cuts and plans, soon to be backed by legislation, to limit wage and benefit increases well below the inflation rate for the next four years. (See: Ontario education workers set to strike Monday against Ford's savage cuts)

Close to 200,000 teachers in Ontario are also on a collision course with Ford's Conservative government, which is seeking to cut their real wages and impose dramatic class-size increases. Teachers in British Columbia are also poised to take strike action. Earlier this year auto parts workers took wildcat actions against Ontario plant closure announcements, and today tens of thousands of workers in Canada's auto and auto parts sectors are closely following the current GM strike and overall contract dispute between the Detroit Three and their 150,000-strong workforce in the United States.

Canada's largest industrial union, with more than 300,000 members, Unifor is doing everything in its power to limit and derail workers' attempts to strike back against austerity, concessions and job cuts. This goes hand-in-hand with its staunch support for the federal Liberal government of Justin Tudeau. The Unifor leadership gave pride of place to Trudeau and his foreign minister, the war-hawk Chrystia Freeland, at the Unifor convention in August, while not breathing a word about the impending struggle of US autoworkers against the Detroit Three.