

Union-backed arbitrator imposes pay freezes on Alberta teachers and nurses

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A trade union-backed arbitration process has imposed pay freezes on members of the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) and the United Nurses of Alberta (UNA).

The decision, which means the ATA's 46,000 members will have had to ensure pay freezes for seven out of the last eight years, strengthens the hand of Jason Kenney's hard-right United Conservative Party (UCP) government as it presses ahead with ruthless austerity and public sector job cuts.

The UNA and ATA had been campaigning for months for the arbitrator to issue his ruling. After unseating the unpopular New Democratic Party government in last April's provincial election, Kenney's UCP adopted Bill 9, the Public Sector Wage Arbitration Deferral Act, an attack on collective bargaining that suspended arbitration proceedings until a review of provincial finances had been carried out. That review, led by former NDP Saskatchewan Finance Minister Janice MacKinnon, recommended sweeping public spending cuts of 20 percent in real terms by 2023, real-terms wage cuts for public sector workers, the gutting of student aid, and the closure of several higher education institutions.

The Kenney government responded to MacKinnon's report by promptly tabling legislation that empowers it to use "replacement workers"—i.e. scabs—to cover essential public services, rather than unionized workers, in the event of strikes by provincial government workers. In its first budget, which Kenney delayed until after the federal election for fear that the unpopular measures contained within it would damage the federal Tory campaign, the UCP announced plans to cut between 6,400 and 7,400 public sector jobs by 2023.

The Kenney government's austerity drive enjoys the support of powerful sections of the Canadian ruling

elite, which have actively encouraged the UCP's promotion of hard-right "Alberta first" regionalism. Kenney, together with Saskatchewan Premier Scott Moe, wrote a letter to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau following his victory in the federal election demanding a renegotiation of the formula for determining equalization payments—the funds that Ottawa gives to so-called "have not" provinces to ensure minimum national standards for health care and public and social services. In effect, such a renegotiation would be used to eviscerate what little remains of federally-funded services.

Trudeau and his Liberals have given credence to Kenney's pro-corporate, anti-worker agenda by accepting him as a spokesman for so-called "western interests," which is in reality a euphemism for the interests of Alberta's Big Oil and energy corporations.

Determined to block working class opposition from developing into a direct challenge to the Kenney government, the unions have responded to the UCP's onslaught with bluster about Kenney's disregard for workers' collective bargaining rights and with a court challenge to Bill 9, which ultimately failed.

The bankruptcy of this strategy is now plain for all to see. Contract arbitration proceedings, which are always designed to meet the needs of the ruling elite at workers' expense, have resulted in the imposition of further real wage-cuts for Alberta's nurses and teachers.

Needless, to say the UCP government has enthusiastically welcomed the arbitration decisions. "These independent public sector wage arbitration outcomes reflect the current economic realities in the province," gloated Finance Minister Travis Toews.

The pay freezes will impact the last year of both collective agreements, which were struck by the unions

with the previous NDP government led by Rachel Notley. Like Kenney's Tories, Notley's NDP enforced wage and hiring freezes on the public sector. But in the hopes of garnering votes, it left open the door to modest wage increases in the contracts' final year, by stipulating that pay levels for the 2019-20 contract-year would be decided by arbitration.

The nurses' collective agreement is scheduled to expire March 31, while the teachers' contract runs until August 31.

With their dead-end perspective of relying on favourable arbitration decisions thoroughly exposed, union leaders resorted to statements of disbelief at the process' entirely predictable outcome. ATA president Jason Schilling said he was "absolutely frustrated and deeply disappointed...in this decision. The Association advanced a very strong argument in arbitration, and I was confident that a modest and reasonable salary increase was possible."

The unions' demobilization of working class opposition to Kenney's austerity agenda has emboldened the government to demand pay cuts from 180,000 public sector workers. On October 29, 2019, Toews announced that the government would seek an average two per cent wage-cut in some thirty upcoming public sector contracts. He added that the wage cuts will vary by bargaining group, meaning some workers could face wage rollbacks of as much as five percent.

Talks with the UNA began January 15, while the ATA will begin bargaining in March. "Even with these (arbitration) decisions, fiscal restraint and discipline must continue as we enter into new collective bargaining negotiations in 2020," stated Toews. "As we said at Budget 2019, there is no new money for public sector raises in the fiscal plan."

The UNA claimed in a press release that it is asking for a two percent raise in each year of a two-year deal and some improvements to contract language. The government, for its part, is demanding sweeping concessions. These include cuts to pay premiums for nurses with advanced degrees, the elimination of designated days of rest for part-time employees, and a reduction of overtime and premiums for working evenings, nights and weekends. UNA President Heather Smith noted that the last time the government pushed for such rollbacks was in 1988, when nurses went on a province-wide strike.

The unions are well aware that the population is seething over wage freezes for workers and multi-billion dollar tax breaks and other handouts to the corporate elite. Last month, the leaders of six trade unions affiliated with the Alberta Federation of Labour told a meeting in Edmonton attended by some 300 workers that plans for a "general strike" were under discussion.

Such militant-sounding rhetoric is aimed at preventing workers from breaking out of the straitjacket imposed by the unions. For decades, the unions opposed a working-class counter-offensive against the cuts and "wage-restraint" programs imposed by successive Progressive Conservative governments, claiming workers could do nothing till an NDP government came to provincial office. Then when the NDP did form government, the unions closely collaborated with the Notley government in its 2015-19 austerity drive.

Far from initiating steps to mobilize the working class, the union bureaucrats are making worried warnings to Kenney that his class war assault is eroding their control over an increasingly restive membership. Responding to the latest arbitration ruling, Alberta Union of Public Employees President Guy Smith remarked with more than a hint of concern, "The anger that has built up is now in danger of spilling out into the streets."



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