

Alberta's right-wing UCP government exploits coronavirus pandemic to lay off at least 20,000 education workers

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Citing the coronavirus pandemic as a pretext, Jason Kenney's hard-right United Conservative Party (UCP) provincial government slashed all non-teacher salary funding to Alberta school boards Saturday, resulting in the layoff of at least 20,000 teaching assistants, cleaners, and other support staff. Just days later, it bragged about creating 6,800 jobs by giving C\$1.5 billion in cash grants to Calgary-based TC Energy Corp. and pledged to fork out up to C\$6 billion more next year to subsidize construction of the Keystone XL Pipeline to the US Gulf Coast.

The public announcement by Education Minister Adriana LaGrange noted, "with in-school classes cancelled indefinitely, funding for K-12 education is being temporarily adjusted to reflect the cost of at-home learning by students during the COVID-19 pandemic." The cuts will amount to a 14 percent reduction to the base instruction grant and 51 percent to transportation funding, a government spokesman told the CBC.

Orders to school boards from the deputy minister of education, Andre Corbould, include the following instructions: "Our direction to school authorities is to limit the use of substitute teachers effective March 31 so these individuals can apply to the expanded federal employment insurance program, as well as other federal support programs. ... School authorities should immediately begin to provide notice to educational assistants with the expectation that their services continue until no later than the end of April." Corbould subsequently said, "School authorities should immediately begin providing notice to non-essential support staff. ... School authorities should immediately begin to provide notice to board employed bus drivers."

In a piece of cynical posturing, the UCP government—which is in the midst of a massive austerity drive that includes the privatization of health care services—declared that any savings generated from the education layoffs will go towards funding the province's efforts to combat the coronavirus pandemic.

Following Kenney's lead, the City of Edmonton issued layoff notices to 2,100 staff on Monday, and the City of Calgary, led by "progressive" Mayor Mayor Naheed Nenshi, announced Tuesday that it is furloughing 1,200 workers.

As a result of Saturday's Education Ministry directive, as many as 25,000 substitute teachers, educational assistants, non-essential support staff and bus drivers will soon be dismissed. Many of the soon to be laid-off workers are members of unions such as CUPE, which, apart from issuing pathetic appeals to Kenney to change course, intend to do nothing.

"We figure this could be up to 20,000 people, about 10,000 CUPE members and about 10,000 others," said CUPE Alberta President Rory Gill. "On a Saturday afternoon, the Kenney Government has just fired thousands of people who look after and educate our kids," said Gill in a press release. "The minister has just passed the buck to the federal government and told education workers, 'good luck out there, there are [emergency relief] programs you can access'."

Facebook and Twitter have lit up with opposition from school support staff and teachers who are still expected to risk their lives by going into dirty, uncleaned schools to work on digitizing lessons for their students.

Finance Minister Travis Toews justified Saturday's massive layoffs of school board employees by saying,

“It’s absolutely incumbent on us as the government to ensure that we’re moving resources to the greatest need.” Apparently, the “need” was much greater for TC Energy, a highly profitable energy infrastructure company that owns oil and natural pipelines in the US, Canada and Mexico.

Kenney justified this “equity investment” in TC Energy Corp. and next year’s huge loan guarantee to “kick-start” the Keystone XL Pipeline, which will transport Alberta tar-sands oil to refineries on the US Gulf Coast, as “steps we must make now to build our future focused on jobs, the economy, and pipelines.”

In truth, Kenney’s corporate bailout for TC Energy and the oil industry more generally and his shredding of tens of thousands of public sector jobs are an intensification of the class war agenda that his UCP government has been pursuing since it came to power a year ago this month.

In October, the UCP tabled a budget that outlined plans to slash per capita public spending by more than 10 percent in real terms by 2023, and to eliminate more than 7,000 public sector jobs, including hundreds of nursing positions. The Kenney government is also vowing to impose wage cuts of up to 5 percent on Alberta’s 180,000 public sector workers, and is known to be considering using a raft of repressive measures to suppress working-class opposition—from hiring scabs to invoking the Canadian constitution’s anti-democratic “notwithstanding clause” to ban strikes and impose concessionary contracts by decree.

In addition to providing billions in bailouts for Big Oil, the Kenney government is preparing to fashion emergency coronavirus measures that will force energy workers to continue risking their lives as the pandemic spreads. The UCP government will declare the oil and gas sector an “essential service,” meaning that it will be able to continue to operate as normal even after the province is officially placed on lockdown. This is in spite of the fact that thousands of energy workers live at close quarters in isolated work camps with high levels of worker turnover, a perfect environment for the deadly virus to run rampant.



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