

Alberta health care workers stage wildcat strike in opposition to job cuts and privatizations

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Thousands of workers at hospitals and other health facilities across Alberta walked off the job early Monday to protest the plans of the right-wing United Conservative Party (UCP) government to eliminate up to 11,000 health care jobs through outsourcing and job cuts.

The strike was swiftly sabotaged by the workers' union, the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees (AUPE), which refused to defend the workers against a draconian back-to-work order issued by the provincial labour relations board late Monday. Nevertheless, the walkout expressed seething class anger in Alberta and across Canada over the ruling elite's disastrous handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We're exhausted, we're really exhausted," Dina Moreira, a striking hospital porter in Edmonton, told CBC. "We're working short every day... We are essential services and our jobs are very important. [Yet Premier Jason Kenney wants] to roll back and cut our jobs. That's not fair. The majority of us are already living paycheck to paycheck, barely making ends meet."

The strike began when 175 workers, including general support staff, cleaners, porters, catering workers, and clerical workers—all of them working without a contract—refused to begin their 7 a.m. shift at the Royal Alexandra hospital in Edmonton. Job action quickly spread to the University of Alberta Hospital, Glenrose Hospital and Alberta Hospital in Edmonton; Foothills Hospital, South Health Campus and Peter Lougheed Centre in Calgary; Red Deer Regional Hospital; and to other facilities in Athabasca, Westlock, Lethbridge, Whitecourt, Cold Lake, Peace River, Leduc, Westview and Fort Saskatchewan.

Kenney's UCP government is savaging public services and laying off thousands of workers in what is the spearhead of the Canada-wide assault the ruling elite is mounting against working people to make them pay for the massive state bailout of the banks and big business organized at the beginning of the pandemic, and more generally the global capitalist crisis.

The UCP government responded to the strike by applying to the pro-employer labour relations board for an injunction against the job action. Predictably, this agency of the capitalist

state, whose counterparts are routinely deployed across Canada to criminalize workers' strikes and protests and enforce the vicious attacks of the ruling class, outlawed the strike a matter of hours after it had begun. The "cease and desist" ruling stipulated that the decision would be filed with the Court of Queen's Bench, meaning anyone who violates it can be criminally prosecuted.

Finance Minister Travis Toews gloated over the result. With unmatched cynicism, Toews, whose government has endangered thousands of people's lives by enforcing the reckless reopening of the economy and schools during the pandemic, and gutted spending on health and education, arrogantly declared, "Albertans should be able to rely on their health-care system with services delivered uninterrupted—no matter the circumstance... Going forward we expect that all unions respect the bargaining process and stop putting Albertans' safety at risk. We will not tolerate illegal strike activity."

Workers took strike action to oppose Health Minister Tyler Shandro's announcement earlier this month that 11,000 public sector health care jobs will be eliminated amid a raging pandemic. The government plans to outsource 9,700 of these positions to private contractors, who will pay even lower wages than the workers currently receive and provide them with virtually no rights or job security. 800 jobs will be eliminated permanently. Shandro boasts that the decision will save the government some \$600 million.

However, this is only the tip of the iceberg. The UCP government has already laid off 20,000 education staff, including teaching assistants, school maintenance workers, cleaners, and clerical employees. It also unilaterally imposed a new fee structure on doctors, forcing cutbacks to services and even the closure of many rural clinics that could no longer operate due to the 20 to 30 percent decline in revenue.

While gutting critical public services, UCP Premier Jason Kenney has funneled billions in handouts to the corporate elite. The UCP cut the provincial corporate tax rate from 12 to 8 percent in July, accelerating its original plan to implement the tax cut over a four-year period. Toews calculates that tax cut

will reduce government revenue by between \$200 million and \$300 million this year alone.

It remains unclear whether a section of the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees apparatus was involved in initiating the wildcat walkout, or the union merely swiftly offered its “support” after it erupted to prevent the action escaping its control. What is clear, however, is that the union never had any intention of waging a genuine struggle. It publicly proclaimed it had no hand in organizing the walkout and abandoned the workers as soon as the labour relations board issued its ruling. AUPE President Guy Smith explicitly stated Monday that his union’s main concern was to secure cooperation with the hard-right UCP government, not protect the workers’ jobs.

Urging Kenney to re-establish the cooperative relationship the unions enjoyed with previous premiers, including the heads of the Conservative governments that ruled the province for decades, Smith said, “The fact that we haven’t been able to have that, build that relationship with this government, means that it could be harder to get to those discussion points. We know we’re going to be at loggerheads, but we’re at a crisis point right now and we’re willing to help resolve that if the government is.”

In keeping with this anti-worker corporatist agenda, the AUPE took on the task of herding workers back onto the job as soon as the strikebreaking decision was published. Making clear that the union leadership saw the strike as little more than a stunt, a statement posted on the AUPE website declared, “After drawing national attention to the privatization of health care in Alberta, health-care staff represented by the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees are returning to work Tuesday... following an order by the Alberta Labour Relations Board to cease and desist their wildcat strike. AUPE is notifying all its members of the obligation to obey the ALRB order by returning to scheduled work.”

This miserable capitulation to the dictates of the hard-right government and its state institutions is in keeping with the role played by the union bureaucracy across Canada. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the unions have deepened their collaboration with big business and the federal government by suppressing all working class opposition to dangerous working conditions and the reckless reopening of the economy and schools. Unifor and the Canadian Labour Congress have focused their energies on partnering with business lobby groups and the Trudeau Liberals to ensure, in the words of one joint statement, that businesses “come roaring back.”

Workers who have sought to oppose the ruling class’ homicidal “herd immunity” policy have been thrown under the bus by the unions. In Ontario, teachers hostile to the unsafe reopening of schools were urged by the province’s four education unions to place their faith in the province’s labour relations board, which promptly tossed out the unions’ case on a technicality. Since that decision was made, the unions have done absolutely nothing to protect the wellbeing of teachers and

students, dozens of whom are being infected with the potentially deadly virus on a daily basis.

Following a massive COVID-19 outbreak at the Cargill meat packing plant in High River, Alberta, which was linked to at least three deaths, the United Food and Commercial Workers union ruled out any strike action by workers to prevent the reopening of the plant, stating that such job action would be “illegal.”

The critical lesson for health care workers to draw is that the defence of their jobs and public services is above all a political struggle. It cannot advance one inch by appealing to the goodwill of the Kenney government or any other capitalist government for that matter, because they all enforce the demands of big business. Nor can workers prevail if they seek to wage their just struggle through the corporatist trade unions. Their main priority is to uphold the pro-corporate collective bargaining system that underpins the privileges of the union bureaucrats, rather than fighting for the workers they purport to represent.

The political struggle workers must wage pits them not only against Kenney, but the opposition NDP, whose four years of austerity when in government between 2015 and 2019 paved the way for the Conservatives to return to power, the federal Liberals, and the entire capitalist state apparatus. Their fight for decent-paying, secure jobs and well-funded health care represents a direct challenge to the ruling elite’s response to the pandemic, which has been based on lavishing hundreds of billions of dollars on the super-rich while imposing savage austerity on workers and public services. While the striking workers are fighting to defend the essential public services that are critical to containing the pandemic and saving lives, the capitalist elite and their hirelings in government are determined to abolish all the social gains made by workers, and allow the virus to run rampant, sanctioning a policy of mass death.

What workers require above all is their own political program and party based on the fight for a workers’ government committed to socialist policies. To take up this struggle, health care workers in Alberta should establish rank-and-file committees independently of and in opposition to the AUPE and the entire union bureaucracy. They should appeal to doctors and nurses, teachers and other education staff, and workers from all sectors of economic life across Canada and internationally to join them in the struggle against capitalist austerity, privatization, and the reckless reopening of the schools and businesses amid a raging pandemic.



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