

UFCW ends 3-month Winnipeg school bus drivers' strike without a contract, as COVID-19 cases skyrocket

Carl Bronski
10 December 2020

The United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union ordered about 95 school bus drivers in Winnipeg to halt their three-month-long strike in the Manitoba capital last week. UFCW officials, bitterly hostile to mobilizing their membership and the broader working class in a political strike against the illegal wage restraint policies of the right-wing provincial government, opted to scuttle the drivers' job action without a new contract.

The union instead applied to the pro-employer Manitoba Labour Board to end the strike in exchange for a yet to be determined "settlement process" to be concluded in February or March.

The return to work takes place as the province weathers a continuing spike in COVID-19 cases, including in the Winnipeg school system. While the authorities steadfastly maintain that the spread of the virus among children attending school is minimal, the number of cases in schools has skyrocketed. In mid-November there were 513 student and 132 school employee infections. By the beginning of December, those numbers had risen to a total of 1,436 infections comprised of 1,084 students and 352 education workers. In Manitoba, elementary school pupils are required to attend classes in person, while high school students receive a mixture of remote instruction and in-school learning. Full remote learning for high schoolers will only begin in January.

Testing for school employees will only be organized in January but even then at an entirely inadequate level. The government has committed to testing school employees only twice a month or if workers show symptoms. Students will not be tested.

It is into this dire situation that the UFCW is ordering

school bus drivers to return. The union's smothering of the strike comes as no surprise, given that it, together with the union bureaucracy as a whole, has worked tirelessly to suppress all working class opposition during the pandemic. The UFCW is infamous for forcing low paid and highly exploited meatpacking workers back on the job at the Cargill plant in High River, Alberta, amid a massive COVID-19 outbreak that claimed four lives. (See: **Canadian workers at Cargill meat packing plant forced back to work despite 935 infections**)

The drivers' strike was the first strike of public sector workers since the Manitoba Progressive Conservative government's antiworker public sector wage control bill was ruled unconstitutional by the province's Court of Queen's Bench. The drivers have been without a contract for 16 months.

In 2017, Premier Brian Pallister and his Conservatives passed Bill 28, which imposed a two-year wage freeze on all public employees with a meager 0.75 percent wage increase in year three of any new contract, followed by one percent in year four. But last June, a provincial court, calling the bill "draconian," struck down the legislation as an infringement on the constitutional right to free collective bargaining. However, the government immediately appealed the decision, insisting that public sector employers must follow the wage restraint targets outlined in the original legislation in all contract negotiations.

In negotiations with the bus drivers, the Winnipeg School Division proclaimed that wages were nonnegotiable. The low wage drivers, who are required to perform additional safety and security duties due to

new coronavirus regulations, are demanding wage increases beyond government stipulations.

The dispute with the bus drivers heralds growing unrest among thousands of public sector workers in the province who are moving into negotiations for their own contracts. Health care, education, social service and childcare workers, as well as employees at Manitoba crown corporations, have all been without contracts for more than four years.

Premier Pallister, with a plummeting job approval rating now at only 32 percent, is seen by Manitobans as responsible for the province's spiking COVID-19 infections. He has resisted implementing measures to halt the virus' spread to ensure that big business profit-making continues at full throttle. In this fall's second wave of the pandemic, Manitoba leads the country in per capita positive cases and deaths.

Since 2016, the government has relentlessly moved forward with cuts to the province's health care system. It has axed three out of the province's six hospital emergency departments. Job cuts have forced nursing staff to work interminable overtime shifts. Even in the midst of the pandemic, the government followed through in September with further job cuts to the healthcare system.

Shortages of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for health workers still plague hospitals and retirement home facilities. Intensive care units and testing labs are overwhelmed, and staffing shortages are forcing nurses into grueling double shifts, day in and day out. Sick days continue to increase among infected nurses or nurses forced to go into preventative quarantine. In recent months, about 100 nurses have contracted COVID-19.

Meanwhile, the residential home care system is in virtual collapse, and First Nations reserves, already without adequate services, are in deep crisis.

Last month, over 1,500 rank-and-file Manitoba nurses sent an open letter to Pallister and Health Minister Cameron Friesen that exposed the dire state of pandemic preparedness some nine months after the global COVID-19 pandemic was declared. The letter followed a similar action taken by provincial doctors.

Significantly, along with demands for more equipment and staff, the nurses have raised the demand for increased control of their workplaces, including participation in decision-making on questions of

increasing staff, procuring necessary equipment and expanding the number of hospital beds.

The nurses' letter solidarized with the action taken by doctors, who have demanded that a lockdown be immediately implemented that would close all nonessential retail establishments and all in-person secondary and postsecondary education, and institute rigorous household "bubble" regulations. The demands were rejected by Health Minister Friesen, who denounced the action, claiming it created "chaos in the system."

Friesen's arrogant branding of healthcare workers as responsible for the current crisis is of a piece with other government statements. Last summer, Pallister alongside right-wing Saskatchewan Premier Scott Moe and Alberta Premier Jason Kenney lobbied the federal government to reduce emergency relief payments to unemployed workers because, they claimed, the payments were a "disincentive" to forcing workers back to work. And just last week, Pallister, in an inflammatory attack on the large indigenous population in the province, said that "Manitobans" will be "at the back of the line" when receiving vaccines because initial disbursements will target hard-hit First Nations communities. In fact, vaccines will initially be distributed to all vulnerable sections of society, including healthcare staff, and residential home care and immune deficient populations.



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