Alberta Health Services disciplines hundreds of workers who joined wildcat strike

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1 March 2021

Alberta Health Services (AHS) has suspended at least 27 workers for up to five days and issued disciplinary letters to hundreds more for participating in a province-wide wildcat strike last October. Seven-hundred-and-seventy-one workers have filed grievances against the management action, and other workers who also received letters are expected to soon follow suit.

The AHS, which is an arm of Alberta's United Conservative Party (UCP)-led government, has also reported at least 8 nurses to the provincial body which regulates the nursing profession in the province. This could ultimately jeopardize their right to work in Alberta as licensed nurses.

These measures are especially draconian because they are being taken against workers who are overworked and mainly low-paid. During last fall's job action, strikers explained how they were living paycheck to paycheck despite labouring under tremendous pressure due to chronic understaffing and the increased pressure of the COVID-19 pandemic. Now, dozens will lose up to five days of pay for exercising their basic democratic right to strike against anti-worker measures.

Last fall's one-day wildcat strike was triggered by widespread opposition to the hard-right UCP government's plans to outsource up to 11,000 health care workers' jobs, including those of hospital porters and catering staff, to the private sector.

Management has also asked the labour board to sanction the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees (AUPE) for their involvement in the job action, although the union insists it did not organize it. AUPE represents about 90,000 workers in the province, including 58,000 in the health care sector. The work stoppage was joined by workers in laundry, cleaning, maintenance and personal support, as well as nurses, at dozens of Alberta hospitals and other health care facilities.

The October 26 wildcat strike was declared illegal by the Alberta Labour Relations Board (ALRB) that same evening. Union officials immediately called on their members to comply with the ALRB ruling and return to work.

The move by management to discipline as many participants in the wildcat as they can identify is a departure from the previous practice of limiting discipline to a handful of so-called "ringleaders," and signals the government's intention to aggressively confront public sector workers in this year's bargaining for new contracts. The government has already served notice it will be seeking wage cuts of up to 5 percent and other concessions.

In last week's austerity budget, the UCP government announced that it intends to reduce the province's annual public sector wage bill by $700 million or 3.5 percent by 2024. When inflation is taken into account, the total cut will be in the order of 10 percent.

The walkout by health care staff took place in the midst of related unrest due to the government's mishandling of the COVID-19 crisis. Since the spring of 2020, workers in the health care sector had staged wildcat actions and work refusals to protest the lack of Personal Protective Equipment. Doctors and nurses had circulated open letters and petitions criticizing the government's actions and urging it to impose immediate lockdown measures. As late as last June, Alberta Premier Jason Kenney characterized the coronavirus as akin to the "flu." By January, the hospital system was so overwhelmed by COVID-19 patients that a field hospital with 750 beds had to be opened in Edmonton.

Alongside health care workers across Alberta, meatpackers and retail workers have denounced

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Kenney for failing to distribute federal funds earmarked for the provinces to support and top up the pay of workers performing essential work during the pandemic.

The Alberta Union of Provincial Employees treated the October wildcat strike as nothing more than a public relations stunt. After the government predictably sought and obtained an order from the pro-employer labour relations board outlawing the job action, the AUPE immediately set about policing this anti-democratic ruling. It prevailed on workers to return to their jobs the very next day, citing the threat of criminal prosecution.

Eager to head off an explosion of worker opposition, the Alberta Federation of Labour (AFL), United Nurses of Alberta, and several other unions launched a tepid "Stand up to Kenney" campaign two days after the strike. Far from proposing any concrete program of struggle, the unions urged workers to individually visit a website to sign a "pledge" that they are ready to "stand up to Kenney" and would join province-wide rallies and protests "that may include job action or strikes called in the future"—wording that committed the union bureaucrats to precisely nothing.

The social democratic NDP, the official opposition in the Alberta legislature, has criticized the AHS disciplinary measures, with the party's labour critic, Christina Gray, saying the government agency is spending a "shocking" "amount of time" "to retaliate against these workers." But when in office between 2015 and 2019 the union-supported NDP pursued health care privatization and austerity. Under Rachel Notley, the Alberta NDP government contracted out 80 percent of continuing care beds and 68 percent of laundry facilities, and privatized surgeries to 43 different clinics. Its budgets imposed real terms cuts in social spending by holding increases below the rate of inflation and population growth.

The Kenney UCP government's plans to privatize 11,000 health care jobs are part of a much broader austerity agenda, aimed at generating the funds necessary to offer massive tax breaks and subsidies to the super-rich. The government already carried out a huge corporate tax cut in July, reducing it by a third in one fell swoop, from 12 percent to 8 percent. In addition, billions of dollars in public funds have been handed over to Big Oil to prop up corporate profits amid a crisis in the energy sector.

At the same time, the decimation of public health care produced by the government's austerity measures will be used as a pretext to push for a vast expansion of for-profit medical care. At last year's UCP annual general meeting, delegates voted by 53 to 47 percent in favour of creating a privately funded and privately managed health care system. Known as Policy 11, the motion in favour of a totally for-profit private "tier" of the Alberta health care system callously referenced the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. "Health care," it declared, "is the greatest budgetary expense. Recent events have shown how vulnerable the system is to demand fluctuations on it."

If a genuine struggle is to be waged against the ruling elite's assault on health care amid the pandemic, workers must advance their own independent class interests in opposition to the pro-capitalist unions. They should establish rank-and-file safety committees in every workplace and neighbourhood to fight to overturn all cuts to health care, and for the provision of billions of dollars to support the health care system and working people throughout the pandemic. A critical demand in this struggle should be the dropping of all disciplinary measures against the wildcat strikers.

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