

Manitoba Hydro workers stage two-day strike after rejecting contract offer

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Two thousand three hundred Manitoba Hydro workers, members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 2034, went out on strike Tuesday afternoon after rejecting a miserable contract offer in a vote held this past Sunday. Workers, voting digitally at a record 94 percent, turned down the provincial government-owned utility's contract proposal by a whopping 88 percent.

The walkout, however, lasted only until Thursday morning, as per the instructions of the IBEW.

The brief all-out strike follows on from several days of local rotating walkouts held earlier this month. Those work stoppages were ended after IBEW Business Manager Mike Espenell appealed to management to issue a revised contract offer. That offer proved to be a slap in the face, as it simply added another year to an earlier derisory three-year contract proposal.

Hydro workers have been without a contract since the expiration of a previous agreement in 2018. The proposal rejected on Sunday provided for a retroactive wage freeze in the first two years of a four-year contract, with a 0.75 percent increase this year and a miniscule 1 percent raise in 2022.

In addition, there would be no restoration of three days of unpaid wages unilaterally stripped from workers last year on the pretence it was needed to pay COVID-19 expenses. The clawback was equivalent to a 1.25 percent wage cut in 2020.

Throughout the contract dispute, Espenell has tried to assure management that he would be willing to back any proposed deal that provides the union apparatus with a fig leaf to push through a concessions contract. As far as wage demands are concerned, he made it clear that the union is not insisting on a wage settlement that even matches inflation. The union, he told reporters, is trying to achieve basic cost-of-living coverage or "anywhere close to that."

Despite months of negotiations, the IBEW and Manitoba Hydro did not reach an Essential Services protocol agreement prior to this week's agreement, but the Crown Corporation said that it had contingency plans in place to deal with this week's job action. The IBEW insisted that any agreement on essential services be tied to a joint commitment to binding arbitration if no contract settlement was reached after 10 days of strike. Management rejected that proposal.

The union has announced no plans for further job action following yesterday's return to work.

Manitoba Hydro is on track for another highly profitable year, regularly surpassing quarterly projections and now expecting a total profit of \$111 million. Such has been the profitability of the corporation over the years that in 2017 it saw fit to give executive management pay increases that hiked their salaries by as much as 40 percent.

The contract proposal rejected on Sunday mirrors the provincial Conservative government's widely despised wage restraint policy guidelines. In 2017, the government passed Bill 28, which imposed a two-year wage freeze on all public employees with a meagre 0.75 percent wage increase in year three of any new contract, followed by 1 percent in year four. But last year, 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 has appealed the decision, and insisted that public employers negotiating with any public sector union continue to follow the wage restraint guidelines outlined in the original legislation.

Such is the arrogance exhibited by Premier Brian Pallister that after opposition NDP leader Wab Kinew voiced his "support" for the Hydro workers, Pallister denounced him for "reckless" interference in the dispute. This as his own government's illegal wage restraint directive lies at the root of the entire conflict.

The dispute with the hydro workers 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 child care workers, as well as employees of other provincial Crown Corporations, have all been without contracts for at least the past three years.

The unions, however, are determined to prevent workers' opposition to the government and its anti-worker agenda from coalescing into a militant confrontation with Pallister. They continue to divide workers along occupation/sectional lines and to insist that workers confine their opposition within the pro-employer, state-designed collective bargaining system and to giving electoral support to the NDP, which for decades has implemented the austerity agenda of the ruling class, when provincial elections are next held in 2023 or 2024.

Just this past December, the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union ordered school bus drivers in Winnipeg to halt their bitter three-month-long strike in the Manitoba capital. Hostile to mobilizing the rank-and-file and the broader working class in a political strike against the wage restraint program of the right-wing government, the UFCW preferred to scuttle the drivers' job action without a new contract. It applied to the pro-employer Manitoba Labour Board to end the strike in exchange for a yet to be determined "settlement process."

The assault on public sector workers' wages is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to attacks on working people across the province. Former right-wing Saskatchewan Premier Brad Wall, whom Pallister appointed to draw up plans to privatize Manitoba Hydro, issued a report last month that recommended the utility be broken up into multiple public-private partnerships though such a plan is opposed by a significant majority of the provincial population. Wall's recommendation proposes Manitoba Hydro be dismantled with small pieces of the Crown Corporation sold off over time, thereby circumventing a provincial law that stipulates the privatization of a Crown Corporation must be approved by referendum. In Ontario, where a similar scheme was introduced under a previous Liberal government, electricity prices increased, while in excess of \$8 billion of public money was required to support the partnerships with the private sector.

The Pallister government is acutely aware of the unrest that threatens to be unleashed as a result of its austerity policies. As rotating strikes by hydro workers were underway, the government tabled a new piece of

legislation that seeks to outlaw protests at sites of "critical infrastructure." This intentionally vague phrase was defined as any place that "makes a significant contribution to the health, safety, security or economic well-being of Manitobans" as well as the land surrounding it. In other words, virtually anywhere.

Manitoba Hydro workers can place no faith in the IBEW to confront the vicious anti-worker policies of the Pallister Conservative government. Like the other unions representing public sector workers, its central concern is preventing the contract disputes with the government from exploding into a mass working class challenge to government austerity. Already, union business manager Espenell has sent numerous signals to management that a confrontation with Pallister is the last thing he desires. The clearest of all was his declaration that the IBEW would accept binding arbitration, a mechanism that invariably results in workers' demands being shredded.

Twice last week, the IBEW extended strike deadlines after Manitoba Hydro management did not meet deadlines set by the union. Espenell told reporters, "We're not interested in prolonging this strike activity, and inconvenience our customers or inconvenience our members for any longer than is absolutely necessary. And we feel that we can accomplish this."

In reality, nothing positive will be accomplished as long as the Hydro workers' struggle is straitjacketed within the collective bargaining system and under the political and organizational control of the pro-capitalist IBEW apparatus. Workers must take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands. A rank-and-file strike committee independent from the IBEW must be formed. Its first task would be to issue an immediate appeal to the tens thousands of workers facing Pallister's wage restraint program and social-spending cuts to mount joint strike action as part of a political struggle against the provincial government and the austerity agenda of the entire Canadian ruling class.



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