

Amid pandemic, Alberta demands 5 percent pay cut from province's nurses

Riksen Stewart
30 July 2021

Alberta's hard-right United Conservative Party (UCP) government is seeking to impose a three percent wage cut and other major rollbacks on the province's 30,000 nurses.

According to the United Nurses of Alberta (UNA)—the union which bargains on behalf of these frontline health care workers—when the government's demands for the elimination of shift and weekend premiums and semi-annual bonuses are taken into account, its salary-cut demand amounts to five percent.

Moreover, as the nurses have been without a contract since last year, it is possible that the government may try to compel them to “repay” thousands of dollars in “excess wages.”

In a statement earlier this month that dripped with arrogance and cynicism, Alberta Finance Minister Travis Toews effusively praised the nurses' efforts during the pandemic, before moving swiftly on to outline his government's sweeping attacks on their pay and conditions. Toews, who manages the finances of the Canadian province that has the lowest tax rates for big business and the rich, claimed the government's concession demands are “reflective of our fiscal reality.” The UCP government is also demanding a four percent pay cut from hospital support-staff.

The attacks on health care workers come as Premier Jason Kenney, who has led the way in enforcing the Canadian ruling elite's “profits before lives” policy in response to COVID-19, declares the pandemic all but over. Despite a renewed surge in COVID-19 cases in Alberta fueled by the more infections and lethal Delta variant, the UCP is removing virtually all public health restrictions over the next few weeks. This includes ending all contact tracing, almost all testing, and even the requirement that those infected with COVID-19 quarantine.

Government budget cuts and concession demands are

having a devastating impact on a health care system that is already on the verge of collapse. Overworked and mentally drained staff are either leaving the profession or looking for jobs outside the province.

The largest hospital in Edmonton, the Royal Alexandra Hospital, as well as the Lacombe Hospital and a dozen other health facilities across Alberta, were forced to close scores of beds earlier this month. Health Minister Tyler Shandro, who owns a private health care company together with his wife, has callously dismissed criticism of his handling of the staff shortages.

Dr. Shazma Mithani, who has been a doctor at the emergency department of the Royal Alexandra Hospital for the last seven years, said that she “has never seen this type of staffing shortage before ... [T]he hospital is really being pushed to the brink in terms of the resources that we have available for our patients.” It's a “vicious cycle,” Mithani explained, that began with staffing challenges, which led to increased workloads, accelerated fatigue and burnout, and further staff shortages. “This is the result of months and months and months of moral injury and stress and burnout that's now all culminating at one time unfortunately,” said Mithani, adding that because other facilities are facing similar challenges, it's difficult to redeploy staff.

Staff shortages have been a problem throughout the pandemic. Nurses and doctors have been required to work more than 16 hours a day with no one to replace them. “We've worked a year and a half of hell,” said Bonnie Gostola, an Alberta Union of Public Employees (AUPE) official. “Many healthcare workers just can't face the workloads anymore. They're actually putting their retirement notices in or they're leaving the province.”

Gostola added that fear of post-pandemic health care cuts is also keeping new potential hires from joining the workforce. “It's basically the future threat,” she explained. “As soon as the pandemic is over, the jobs will

go. Who's going to want to come into an industry where you're already short (staffed)?"

Prior to the pandemic, the UCP government announced plans to eliminate up to 10,300 full-time equivalent positions—including hundreds of nursing and clinical support positions. Layoffs and job displacement through contracting-out were expected to impact as many as 16,700 full- and part-time employees. Subsequently, the government had to promise it would not lay off any front-line medical workers during the pandemic and claimed that most of the nursing positions would, in any event, be eliminated due to natural attrition. But now that the UCP has declared the pandemic to be all but over, it is once again moving to put all options on the table.

Prior to the start of the pandemic, the nurses were told by their union that the best that they could hope for in a new contract was a four-year wage freeze—which when inflation, currently running at more than three percent, is taken into account would mean a real-terms wage cut of well over 10 percent.

The UCP attempts to justify its savage attacks on health care workers with lying claims that there is no money available and that cuts must be made to balance the budget. However, there has always been plenty of money for corporate tax cuts and handouts to big business, especially Big Oil. This includes: the \$1.3 billion the UCP government squandered on trying to salvage the now cancelled Keystone XL pipeline; its \$4.7 billion corporate tax cut; the \$2.1 billion the Alberta Investment Management Corporation lost on high-risk investments; and the \$825 million Alberta has lavished on the money-losing Sturgeon Oil Refinery.

If the UCP has thus far been able to impose its vicious attacks on essential health care workers, despite mass anger among the workers and widespread public support for them, it is because the unions and the opposition New Democrats have systematically suppressed worker opposition. Nurses have not received a pay raise in over five years, a period of time that includes the four-year (2015-19) term of Rachel Notley's NDP provincial government. In the name of "fiscal responsibility," the ostensibly "pro-worker" NDP imposed, with the unions' complicity, social spending cuts and wage "restraint."

The UNA and AUPE, which represents health care support staff, have done nothing to organize strikes or worker job action, even though thousands of health care workers' jobs are at risk.

Last fall, more than a thousand health care workers took matters into their own hands, walking off the job in a

wildcat strike for a day. When the strike was declared illegal by the provincial labour relations board, the unions immediately did the government's bidding and prevailed on the workers to return to work. Nor have the AUPE and the Alberta Federation of Labour (AFL) organized any action to defend the 27 workers who were suspended for their role in the wildcat and the 771 who were issued letters of warning.

UNA President Heather Smith has admitted that there is growing rank-and-file pressure for a strike. "There's certainly some who would suggest that legal or not, we should do it now," she told CTV. Smith has indicated that the union will sanction a "day of action" including "information pickets" at hospitals next month. Making clear that this is more about maintaining control over UNA members than organizing a genuine struggle against the Kenney government, Smith told CBC that the protest actions were being planned while "discussions about non-union-sanctioned wildcat strikes are percolating."

The AFL, UNA, and AUPE are bitterly opposed to waging a genuine struggle against the Kenney government's class-war assault on the public health care system and on the wages and jobs of the workers who administer it. Such a struggle would require mobilizing workers in Alberta and across the country in a working class industrial and political offensive against the ruling class' austerity agenda and the anti-worker laws whereby it has largely illegalized worker opposition. The unions intend to use their token "days of action" to divert workers into a futile campaign to pressure Kenney to "see reason" and to replacing the UCP government at the next provincial election in 2023 with an NDP government no less beholden to big business.



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