

Tens of thousands of New Brunswick public sector workers vote for strike

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More than 22,000 New Brunswick provincial public sector workers affiliated with the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) are voting overwhelmingly in favour of strike action. Employed in the health care, education, social service, transportation, and other sectors, the New Brunswick government workers have been without contracts for between two and four years.

The vote totals from all eight of the CUPE locals to have released results to date show massive rank-and-file support for job action. The latest to report, CUPE Local 1252, said the over 11,000 health care workers who comprise its membership had voted 94 percent in favour of a strike. The two remaining CUPE locals, which represent some 1,800 workers in the trades and education sectors, are expected to release their strike vote results later this week.

The strike movement among New Brunswick public sector workers is part of a wave of struggles across Canada and internationally against the decades-long assault big business and governments of all stripes have mounted on workers' wages, social rights, and public services. This assault has only intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The common issues facing New Brunswick public sector workers are miserable wages and working conditions. The province has the lowest median wages and the poorest paid public sector workers in Canada. Years of wage "restraint"—in reality real wage cuts—have forced many public employees to take on second jobs or leave their jobs and the province altogether. New Brunswick is Canada's poorest province with some of the highest rates of child poverty and food insecurity in the country.

Contract negotiations with the province's Tory government fell apart in early September, when Premier Blaine Higgs arrogantly dismissed CUPE's demand for a modest "wage catch-up"—5 percent annual wage increases for four years—as "not realistic." His government's most recent offer of a six-year contract containing wage increases of 1.25 annually for 4 years, then 2 percent in the fifth and sixth years doesn't come close to Canada's inflation rate, which in August was running year-to-year at 4.1 percent, its highest level in nearly two decades. The government's meagre wage offer is combined with demands for more concessions. Among them is converting

workers' pensions plans to the reactionary "shared-risk model" system that Higgs introduced for many provincial employees in 2013-14, when he was New Brunswick's finance minister. Under this model, workers are forced to make larger pension contributions and must bear the cost in the form of lower benefits if pension investments turn sour.

Like his political counterparts elsewhere, Higgs has presided over a criminal policy of mass infection and death over the course of the pandemic. His government has systematically refused to impose restrictions on economic activity that would affect the pocketbooks of the rich, no matter the cost to human lives.

In February, as the third pandemic wave was about to rip through the country, Higgs made clear that corporate interests would continue to be prioritized over the most basic public health measures. During his annual state of the province address he declared, "Who would have thought that amidst a global pandemic I would be sharing highlights of well over \$200 million in new private investment projects."

Then, at the end of July, ignoring warnings from infectious disease experts, his government prematurely dropped all of its COVID-19 restrictions—the first province in Atlantic Canada to do so. He promoted the patently false claim that the western province of Alberta's early reopening was a success. In fact, Alberta now has four times more cases per capita than the rest of Canada, its health care system is on the brink of collapse, and triage, the process of denying care to the COVID patients deemed least likely to survive, has begun.

Since lifting all restrictions, New Brunswick has experienced a surge in infections driven by the highly infectious Delta variant. Just in the past two months, the province's total number of infections throughout the pandemic has risen by 75 percent. On Saturday, health authorities reported single-day records of 140 new infections and 764 active cases, and four new fatalities, including that of a 39-year-old firefighter.

Amid this fourth-wave pandemic surge, at least 854 nursing jobs in the province remain vacant, with some hospitals experiencing a 50 percent shortage of nursing staff, forcing some emergency rooms to temporarily close. Meanwhile, an explosion of cases and neglectfully low staffing levels in nursing homes across the province forced one union official to

proclaim a rhetorical “state of crisis.”

So dire is the situation that the province was compelled on September 24 to re-impose a state of emergency. The government has reinstated some nominal half-measures such as mask requirements in indoor public places, and admitted the province was wrong to lift all health-protection orders in late July, but schools and non-essential businesses remain fully open.

As workers confront this all-sided social catastrophe, the province’s richest billionaires have become even wealthier. Between April and October this year, the wealth of James Irving, owner of the JD Irving conglomerate, rose by 35 percent, from \$6 billion to \$8.1 billion; while the fortune of Arthur Irving, the owner of Irving Oil, swelled from \$3.3 billion to \$4.4 billion.

The CUPE New Brunswick public sector workers’ strike vote follows a wave of militant worker struggles in the province and across the country, including months-long strikes by Vale miners in Sudbury, Ontario, Rio Tinto aluminum smelter workers in Kitimat, B.C., and Olymel slaughterhouse workers in Vallée-Jonction, Quebec.

In August, 6,000 nurses and nurse practitioners rejected a concessions-laden deal negotiated by the New Brunswick Nurses Union and the provincial government. The vote was a rebellion against the union, which had lauded the tentative agreement reached in July as “a step in the right direction.” While describing the rejection vote as “overwhelming,” the union has refused to divulge the vote percentages. On September 17, nurses held rallies across the province to protest their onerous working conditions and the deteriorating quality of care they can provide, due to stress, exhaustion, staff-shortages and limited resources.

The unions are doing their best to contain and suppress the worker opposition to low wages, dilapidated public services and the government’s prioritization of profits over lives during the pandemic. If New Brunswick’s public sector workers have worked for years without contracts, it is because CUPE has been desperately seeking to prevent a clash with the Higgs government and its austerity drive and to keep workers shackled within the pro-employer labour relations system.

Although Higgs baldly announced last December that the wage-freeze his government had imposed on non-union public sector workers would serve as its template for new contracts with CUPE, the union waited more than eight months to even call strike votes. Nor is it issuing any warning about or in any way preparing to resist the province’s “contingency plans” in the event of a strike, i.e., its plans to use emergency back-to-work legislation to criminalize the workers’ job action.

Even now, after the membership has voted so decisively for strike action, CUPE has served notice that it intends to keep workers on a tight leash by limiting any job action to a “work-to-rule” campaign or at most rotating strikes. Its aim is to buy time for it to connive with the province on how to impose yet

another concessionary contract. When asked what the union plans to do when all the strike votes are confirmed, CUPE New Brunswick President Stephen Drost said job action “typically starts with work-to-rule. Then we’ll be looking at where are the weakness and vulnerabilities throughout the province, so there could be different parts of the province (where) job action is taken.”

In other words, the union has no intention of organizing a unified strike of all 22,000 workers, let alone making a provincial public sector workers’ strike the spearhead of a broader working class mobilization to defend public services and defeat against the austerity agenda of big business and its political hirelings. Rather, the union intends to continue to drag out the dispute, wearing down workers’ militancy with toothless rotating strikes and futile appeals to Higgs to “see reason,” even as the government girds itself for confrontation, including, if need be, outlawing all job action.

Drost and the CUPE bureaucracy’s determination to demobilize the public sector workers is in keeping with the role “Canada’s largest union” and its private sector counterparts have played for decades. In 2019, CUPE Ontario’s education unit reached an eleventh-hour agreement with the province’s Progressive Conservative government that enshrined tens of millions of dollars in cuts and torpedoed opposition to the government’s drive to impose real-terms wage-cuts on 1 million Ontario public sector workers under its Bill 124. In Quebec, CUPE and the rest of the union bureaucracy spent much of 2020 and 2021 systematically sabotaging the struggle of more than a half-million public sector workers against the demands of Francois Legault and his right-wing populist CAQ government for new concessionary contracts.

The rotten role of the unions amid the mushrooming social crisis underscores yet again the urgent necessity of workers taking the struggle into their own hands. Critical public services and workers’ livelihoods can only be defended and improved by mobilizing the social power of the working class in a political struggle that challenges not only the Higgs government in New Brunswick, but the ruling elite across the country and all its political representatives, including the federal Liberal government, which is no less dedicated to imposing big business’ austerity agenda of increased worker exploitation at home and imperialist aggression abroad.



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