

Thousands of New Brunswick public sector workers strike against poverty wages

Our reporter
29 October 2021

Thousands of New Brunswick public sector workers launched strike action Friday, forcing the closure of the east coast Canadian province's public schools and disrupting other government operations.

The strikers include: school caretakers, bus drivers, educational assistants and support staff; community college maintenance workers; Transport Department and provincial park workers; social workers; and some health care workers.

The strikers are among the lowest-paid public sector workers in Canada. They have been working without contracts for four years or more and face a hard-right Progressive Conservative government that is determined to impose concessionary contracts.

Yet the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) has refused to say if the strike will continue into next week, let alone advanced any strategy to counter Premier Blaine Higgs' vow to use back-to-work legislation or the arbitrary powers the government possesses under the province's COVID-19 state of emergency to suppress it.

When asked how the strike would proceed, CUPE New Brunswick President Steve Drost said Friday, "I can't confirm any details." He claimed that how and whether the job action will proceed will be left up to each of the ten CUPE locals, representing 22,000 workers currently in negotiations. At least some workers from seven of the locals walked off the job Friday.

Government negotiators abruptly broke off talks Tuesday after CUPE negotiators balked at their offer of a 10 percent wage increase over five years. In real terms—once inflation, which in September was up 4.5 percent on a year-to-year basis, is taken into account—this would amount to a massive wage cut.

The government is also demanding pension cuts, by transferring workers to so-called "shared-risk" plans.

When CUPE responded Wednesday to the government's provocative stance by saying strike action

was imminent, Higgs immediately threatened to criminalize it. In doing so, he cynically invoked the sharp rise in COVID-19 cases in recent weeks that has resulted from his government's rush to throw off all pandemic restrictions. Higgs, who declared the government's miserly offer to be final, said he "would use whatever means I have in order to protect and limit the impact on the citizens of this province, especially when we are in the pandemic, and we have an emergency order in place."

Back-to-work legislation could be introduced as early as next Tuesday when the new session of the legislature begins. Higgs reiterated his threat to outlaw job action Thursday. "We are prepared to take necessary action," declared Higgs in a statement, "possibly including legislation, to keep New Brunswickers safe and healthy with access to essential services, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic."

Higgs' attempt to accuse the workers of denying essential services to the population is a fraud. In reality, CUPE already reached an agreement with the government to maintain essential services in the event of a strike. Moreover, in New Brunswick, as across Canada, health care, education and other vital services have been ravaged by decades of capitalist austerity.

The Higgs' Conservative government has been emboldened by CUPE's systematic demobilization of the provincial public sector workers. Negotiations have dragged on for years, and the union has repeatedly put off job action despite massive support for it among the rank-and-file. In late September and early October, as overwhelming votes in favour of strike action rolled in from all ten locals, Drost and the CUPE leadership still sought to drag out the process interminably, declaring that the first step would be a work-to-rule campaign, followed by regionally limited walkouts.

CUPE ultimately felt it had no other option but to call the strike, above all due to the militancy and

determination among its members. Speaking with the CBC, Drost said it has been some 15 years since his members received a real wage increase, having been subject to wage restraint programs by Liberal and Conservative provincial governments alike. “They’ve fallen so far behind the cost of living,” said Drost. “They are prepared to do whatever is necessary to get a fair wage.”

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Fearful that a struggle for substantial pay increases would embolden the workers and galvanize support for their strike across the country, CUPE has repeatedly scaled back the workers’ demands. In the most recent round of talks, CUPE effectively abandoned the workers’ demand for a “catch up” wage increase, reducing its wage demand from 20 percent over four years, to just 12 percent. When the current rate of inflation is taken into account, the union proposal amounts to a real-terms pay cut.

Drost has proclaimed that any attempt to suppress the strike through a back-to-work law would be an “abuse of power.” Aside from this demagoguery, neither Drost nor any other CUPE official has explained how they would respond to strikebreaking legislation.

Workers must beware. CUPE’s radio silence on what workers should do when back-to-work legislation is imposed is a sure sign that the union is preparing to capitulate without a fight and help enforce the legislation. Governments of all political stripes at the federal and provincial level have implemented dozens of strikebreaking laws over the past four decades, and CUPE and the other trade unions have refused time and again to resist them. The unions typically justify their capitulation to such anti-democratic laws by insisting that they will challenge them in the courts, which more often than not uphold the “constitutionality” of governments smashing workers’ strikes on behalf of the employers. Such legal challenges invariably take years, forcing workers to labour under the terms of sellout or arbitrator-imposed agreements that they were determined to resist. On the rare occasions when courts strike down back-to-work laws because they are so manifestly anti-democratic, the ruling generally has no practical result. If workers are lucky to win anything at all, it is always a tiny fraction of what was plundered from them by the bosses and their governments.

The 22,000 public sector workers in New Brunswick are in a powerful position to defy back-to-work legislation

and fight for demands to secure a decent standard of living, including an immediate 20 percent pay increase and government-funded pensions for all. A mounting strike wave across Canada, the United States and internationally is developing over low pay, miserable working conditions, attacks on pension rights, and job security. It is being fuelled by the vast enrichment of the ruling elite during the pandemic, while workers have been forced to risk their lives and those of their loved ones due to the “live with the virus” policy. Under these conditions, an appeal from workers in New Brunswick to other sections of workers across Canada and internationally to join their struggle would be met with enthusiasm.

This struggle is above all a political fight. Resisting back-to-work legislation and fighting for decent pay and pensions means challenging the entire agenda of capitalist austerity pursued by every government across Canada. It means starting from what workers actually need, not from what right-wing politicians like Higgs and well-paid CUPE bureaucrats say the capitalist state and big business can afford. Above all, it requires a struggle to deploy society’s vast resources to meet social needs, not private profit.

To take forward their strike, the *World Socialist Web Site* encourages New Brunswick public sector workers to build rank-and-file strike committees, so they can take the conduct of their struggle into their own hands. These committees must be established independently of and in opposition to CUPE and be led by the most trusted and militant workers. The committees should take steps to broaden the strike, build solidarity among other sections of workers, and prepare to challenge Higgs’ back-to-work law with a worker-led counteroffensive for decent-paying, secure jobs for all.



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