

Right-wing New Brunswick government locks out 3,000 education workers amid public sector strike

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In a move aimed at ruthlessly imposing wage and benefit concessions, New Brunswick's right-wing Conservative government locked out 3,000 education workers Sunday. The decision, which impacts custodians, librarians, and administrative staff, comes as some 22,000 public sector workers across the eastern Canadian province enter their fifth day of strike action today.

The strike currently covers workers in health care, education, social work, transport, community colleges, and provincial parks. The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) has yet to make clear if and when it will call out the remainder of its members.

The government's draconian move meant that all schools shifted to online learning Monday. In a vindictive move, Education Minister Dominic Cardy announced that 45 percent of all education assistants, who have been deemed "essential workers" to prevent them from striking, would be placed on leave without pay with just one day of notice. Cardy arrogantly asserted that these workers have no duties while students learn from home. Cardy added that schools would stay online until the strike is over, i.e., until CUPE and the government have enforced a rotten sellout agreement on thousands of public sector workers.

New Brunswick's Tory government, like its provincial and territorial counterparts across Canada, has incessantly claimed throughout the COVID-19 pandemic that there is no alternative to in-person schooling. Their insistence on reopening schools as the deadly virus raged and keeping them open as infections have soared over the past month has resulted in the mass infection of kids with a potentially deadly virus. The purpose of this homicidal policy has been to free parents from childcare responsibilities so they can go to work generating profits for big business. However, when it comes to imposing vicious austerity on public sector workers, schools can apparently be switched to online learning overnight, with in-person classes suspended until the government gets its way.

Led by Premier Blaine Higgs, the government is doubling down on its aggressive attacks on wages and benefits. After CUPE proposed a 12 percent pay increase over four years in bargaining last week, which would have amounted to a real-terms pay cut, the government responded with 10 percent over five years. After the union announced the strike, the government reduced its offer still further to 8.5 percent over five years, or less than 2 percent per year. The Higgs government also wants to shift workers to a "shared risk" pension plan, which requires workers to make larger pension contributions from their already low wages and cover any losses when pension investments turn bad.

Higgs has threatened to criminalize the strike with back-to-work legislation, which could be tabled in the provincial legislature this week. Higgs announced Monday that the government was suspending the traditional throne speech that opens a parliamentary session so it could "move quicker if needed," adding, "It's going to be a day-by-day thing."

The opposition Liberals have indicated their willingness to vote to ban the strike, provided the law is "debated" in the legislature.

In their struggle, New Brunswick public sector workers confront a conspiracy of the entire political establishment aimed at enforcing low wages and miserable conditions. The fact that all parties, from the right-wing Tories to the nominally "left" New Democratic Party (NDP), are interchangeable is underscored by the role of Education Minister Cardy. Between 2011 and January 2017, Cardy served as leader of the provincial NDP. During his tenure, he was a strong supporter of federal NDP leader Thomas Mulcair, a self-declared admirer of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and balanced budgets. Cardy then became chief of staff of the Progressive Conservatives caucus in the New Brunswick legislature before joining the Higgs government.

By contrast, there is widespread public sympathy for the New Brunswick strikers. Dozens of protest marches were

held across the province this summer. Six thousand nurses represented by the New Brunswick Nurses Association are battling the government over similar issues, having decisively repudiated a union-backed sellout deal in August.

Speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site*, an education assistant from Quebec described the decision to lock out education staff without pay as “disgraceful” he said the government’s aim was to “intimidate” and “divide” workers. A caretaker from Ontario added, “I think it sets a precedent for premiers across the country in the future to lock out public sector workers.”

The New Brunswick public sector strike is part of a wave of working class strikes and job actions sweeping North America. Over 10,000 workers at agricultural manufacturer John Deere are approaching three weeks on the picket line in a struggle for significant wage increases, an end to multi-tier wage structures, and improvements to working conditions against the multinational. In Canada, recent months have seen strikes at Vale, Rio Tinto, and ArcelorMittal in the industrial sector, and meatpacking plants in Quebec, and large votes for strike action among grocery workers in Alberta and Ontario.

In all of these struggles, workers have confronted not only brutal employers and governments, but also the trade unions’ efforts to sabotage their fight. Many strikes have only taken place following massive rebellions by rank-and-file workers against the unions’ determination to impose concessions-laden contracts, such as when 70 percent of Vale employees defied the USW to vote down a sellout agreement. At Deere, Volvo Trucks and auto parts supplier Dana, workers have taken the step of establishing rank-and-file committees to organize their struggles independently of the pro-corporate unions.

The task of establishing rank-and-file strike committees in every workplace is posed no less urgently for public sector workers in New Brunswick. If the Higgs government feels capable of responding to the strike so belligerently, it is above all because CUPE has worked systematically to demobilize its members. Many public sector workers have been without contracts for more than four years. Yet CUPE has drawn out the bargaining process with interminable negotiations, even when it was clear that the government had no intention of seriously addressing workers’ grievances.

Even after all 10 union locals returned overwhelming majorities in favour of a strike in late September, CUPE New Brunswick leadership delayed any job action for a further two weeks, giving the government time to plan its attack. CUPE New Brunswick head Steve Drost justified the delay by claiming that the union was considering work-to-rule and regional strikes, options that are calculated to prevent the workers from exerting the immense social power

they have in an all-out strike.

CUPE was ultimately forced to call a strike due to the militancy among the workers. But the union is doing everything to suppress the job action. It has said nothing about Higgs’ repeated threats to impose back-to-work legislation, which is a clear indication that CUPE will bow to such a draconian law without a fight. This has been how unions have responded across the country to the dozens of back-to-work laws implemented by governments of all political stripes over the past three decades, helping to enforce round after round of “wage restraint” and attacks on worker rights.

A genuine workers’ organization would respond to Sunday’s lockout by expanding its efforts to mobilize the broadest possible sections of the working class in the province and across Canada to defy the government’s savage attacks. Instead, CUPE launched a pathetic appeal to Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) yesterday, urging them to “show their support.” Picket lines were set up outside MLA constituency offices in Campbellton, Miramichi, Moncton, Sussex, Saint John, Fredericton, Woodstock, and other locations. No initiatives were announced to build support among workers.

To prevail in their strike, New Brunswick public sector workers must recognize that their struggle is above all political. Achieving a decent standard of living, including an immediate 20 percent pay increase to make up for the decades of wage and benefit cuts, and guaranteed pensions for all, will require a direct confrontation with the Higgs government and its agenda of capitalist austerity.

Striking public sector workers must prepare to defy back-to-work legislation by building rank-and-file committees and broadening their fight to other sections of workers across the country who face the same onslaught on their wages and living standards by a ruling elite that has enriched itself amid a deadly pandemic. This worker-led counteroffensive must fight for a workers’ government to expropriate the ill-gotten fortunes of Canada’s financial oligarchy and redistribute society’s vast resources to meet the social needs of the majority of working people. These include well-funded education, health care, and social services, and decent-paying, secure jobs for all.



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