

New Brunswick premier meets with top CUPE official in bid to shut down militant public sector strike

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Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) New Brunswick President Steve Drost met yesterday with Premier Blaine Higgs as the province's Progressive Conservative government and the union bureaucracy ramped up their efforts to end a militant strike by more than 20,000 public sector workers. Education support staff, health care workers, social workers, transportation employees and other provincial public sector workers today enter their second week of strike action, in a fight for better wages and to defend their pensions.

New Brunswick's public sector workers are the lowest paid in the country and for the past 15 years have been subjected to wage "restraint" regimes that have significantly slashed their real incomes.

The workers' initial modest demand for a 20 percent "catch-up" pay hike, spread over four years, was arrogantly rejected by Higgs, a former Irving Oil executive, as unaffordable. In a long series of closed-door bargaining rounds prior to the strike, CUPE negotiators watered down the workers' demands to a call for pay increases of 3 percent in each year of a four-year contract, although inflation is currently running at an annual rate of 4.5 percent. Yet even this was too much for the Conservative government. It is pushing for a single-digit rise over the course of a five-year deal.

Drost's readiness to meet with Higgs despite the premier giving no commitment to either withdraw his threats to criminalize the strike or give the workers a penny more underscores that the striking public sector workers face a battle on two fronts. They confront the government, which is determined to impose ruthless austerity on working people, and CUPE, which would rather shut down the strike and impose a sellout contract than allow it to become a rallying point for a genuine mass movement for higher wages, secure pensions and improved public services.

The main factor behind yesterday's meeting was the growth in popular support for the strike, which has clearly frightened both Higgs and the CUPE leadership. On Tuesday, at least 4,000 strikers and their supporters marched to the provincial legislature in one of the largest demonstrations in the history of Fredericton, a town of just 60,000 people. The next day, another demonstration drew hundreds more to the same location.

The government has also experienced strong pushback from parents after it locked out 3,000 education staff represented by

CUPE on Sunday and ordered all schools to transition to online learning. As a show of solidarity with the strikers, large numbers of parents across the province have refused to register their kids for online classes.

When implementing the school support staff lockout, Education Minister Dominic Cardy placed on leave without pay the 45 percent of the province's education assistants barred from striking because they are designated "essential workers" under provincial labour law. However, on Monday, the province's Labour and Employment Board, no doubt conscious of the widespread popular outrage over the government's draconian actions, ruled that Cardy's decision to place the education assistants on unpaid leave was unlawful.

As has become standard procedure for the corporatist trade unions in every economic sector, CUPE refused to say anything publicly in advance of yesterday's meeting with Higgs about what would be discussed. A union spokesperson merely confirmed late Wednesday that Drost had been invited for discussions with the premier at 1 p.m. Thursday. Five hours after the meeting began, it was reportedly still underway.

Workers should take this as a serious warning that a conspiracy to sell out their struggle is far advanced. There is no basis for negotiations with a government that claims the best offer it can make is an 8.5 percent wage "increase" over five years, which translates to a pathetic 1.7 percent per year. Moreover, Higgs insisted earlier this week that he would only resume bargaining with CUPE if the union agreed in advance to gut workers' pension rights by accepting the adoption of the "shared risk" model for school bus drivers. Under "shared risk," the government is freed from any obligation to top-up workers' pensions if investments go south on the ever more volatile stock market.

Higgs has repeatedly threatened to impose back-to-work legislation to criminalize the strike. Twice this week he said that such a law would target all 58,000 provincial workers, not just the striking CUPE workers. This would include over 6,000 nurses, who in August overwhelmingly rejected a concessions-filled agreement backed by their union. "If you look at legislation that has been put in on a wage bill anywhere in the country, you don't pick or choose," asserted Higgs Tuesday. "It is the wage bill for government."

Higgs probably had in mind the ruthless "wage cap" imposed by

his fellow hard-right Tory premier Doug Ford in Ontario. It has limited the wage increases of over 1 million public sector workers to a meagre 1 percent per year for the past three years. When Ford unveiled this vicious measure in early 2019, CUPE, Ontario's four teacher unions and the other public sector unions refused to mobilize their members to fight it, let alone mounted any struggle against Ford's broader agenda of sweeping social spending cuts. In the education sector, CUPE led the way in enforcing the wage cap by torpedoing a threatened strike of 60,000 education staff at the 11th hour in October 2019 and ramming through a three-year concessionary contract. After calling a one-day strike involving over 200,000 teachers in February 2020, Ontario's teacher unions seized on the COVID-19 pandemic to justify a similar sellout.

If the Higgs government is delaying carrying through on its threat to use back-to-work legislation to criminalize the strike, it is because it would much prefer to have the CUPE union apparatus strangle it, thereby avoiding the risk of mass worker defiance.

On Monday, Higgs cancelled plans to kick off a new parliamentary session when the legislature resumed sitting Tuesday, a move he justified with reference to the need to remain "flexible" in responding to the strike. However, as of yet, his government has neither tabled a bill criminalizing the job action nor put it on the order paper. In comments Monday, Education Minister Cardy hinted that the government could let the strike go on for some time, declaring that he would not be surprised if New Brunswick's schools continue online learning throughout next week. Higgs and Cardy would use this time to seek to whip up popular anger against the strikers by exploiting the hardships the dispute—and in particular the government's decision to suspend in-person schooling—is placing on parents.

However, should the Conservative government opt to break the strike through enacting an anti-democratic back-to-work law, they know that they can rely on the unions to police it, as has happened on numerous occasions across Canada in recent struggles.

CUPE, which with 700,000 members boasts it is the country's largest union, has remained conspicuously silent on what it would tell workers to do in the event of a strikebreaking law, thereby signalling it intends to order workers to submit to it without a fight. New Brunswick Nursing Union (NBNU) President Paula Doucet was less circumspect when asked about her reaction to Higgs' threat to subject all public sector workers to a government-imposed wage settlement. "We have some legal [people] here in our office that would definitely put their eyes to that," she declared. In other words, the NBNU would order nurses to accept the imposed wage settlement, claiming that it could best be challenged in the courts. Long experience has shown such courts challenges are a sham. Almost invariably, Canada's courts have upheld laws criminalizing strikes and imposing concessionary contracts, and on the rare occasions they have not, workers have received only a pittance in compensation years later.

The Higgs government is also considering using the emergency powers granted to it under a COVID-19 ordinance to order some strikers back to work without even the cursory parliamentary debate a strikebreaking law would require. Higgs asserted Thursday that the province's COVID-19 emergency ordinance could allow him to outlaw the job action by CUPE-affiliated health

care workers. "Something," he declared, "has to give. We can't let the health care system be impacted."

The cynicism contained in this statement would be hard to beat. It is the Higgs government, not health care workers, that is responsible for the growing strain on the province's hospitals. Following the example of "herd immunity" advocate Alberta Premier Jason Kenney, Higgs ordered the lifting of almost all COVID-19 restrictions last summer, as part of the profits-before-lives policy of Canada's capitalist elite. The result has been a surge in COVID-19 infections and deaths in New Brunswick. In recent weeks, as the province experienced its most devastating pandemic wave to date, Higgs and Cardy insisted that schools must remain open for in-person learning, ostensibly so as to protect kids' mental health and ensure quality education. Yet when it comes to enforcing brutal austerity, schools can be switched to online learning overnight and kept there as long as it takes for the government to get its way.

To confront the threats from the government to criminalize their struggle and from CUPE to sell it out, public sector workers must broaden their strike. All 58,000 public sector employees in New Brunswick, public sector workers across Canada, and workers in all sectors of industry, manufacturing and transportation, must be unified in a joint struggle for decent-paying, secure jobs, guaranteed pensions fully funded by employers and well-funded public services. This movement must prepare to defy any legislation outlawing the New Brunswick strike and any effort by the CUPE bureaucracy to ram through a rotten deal on the government's terms. To this end, strikers should establish rank-and-file strike committees independently of and in opposition to the CUPE bureaucracy.

In conducting this fight, striking public sector workers must recognize that their struggle is, above all else, political. The seven days of strike action so far have demonstrated that the demand for decent wages and pensions pits workers directly against the ruling elite's class war agenda of capitalist austerity. To resist this onslaught, the New Brunswick public sector strike must be made the starting point for the development of a mass mobilization of working people to fight for a workers government that will use society's vast resources to meet urgent social needs, not serve private profit.



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