

Striking New Brunswick public sector workers win broad popular support

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Around 20,000 public sector workers in the eastern Canadian province of New Brunswick enter their third week on strike Friday for wage increases and in defence of pension rights. The custodians, transportation workers, community college employees, administrative staff, court stenographers, jail guards and others are up against the province's ruthless right-wing Conservative government, which is determined to enforce real-terms pay cuts for the low-paid workers as inflation skyrockets.

The strike enjoys overwhelming popular support. A poll commissioned by the New Brunswick division of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) revealed that 84 percent of respondents back the call for wage increases, with over 60 percent saying they support it strongly. Social media platforms and news articles are full of supportive comments for the job action. "These are people who work in an industry that literally holds our lives in their hands," wrote Betty, speaking for many workers. "Just give them what they want." Another commenter remarked, "We have situations in all public sectors that need to be addressed, working conditions are deteriorating at an alarming pace. Workers are fatigued and stretched to the limit. Higgs and advisors, dig your heads out of the sand and do some good for NB for once and settle these contracts."

Strikers began their struggle demanding a 20 percent increase over four years, which would barely keep pace with inflation. Premier Blaine Higgs, a former Irving Oil executive and shill for the corporate elite, arrogantly dismissed the wage demand as "unaffordable" and insisted that two union locals, representing bus drivers and school custodians, accept the end of their guaranteed pension plan. The government's latest offer, which Higgs has described as "final," contains a mere 2 percent per year "increase" over five years, plus an additional 25 cents per year across all job classifications.

As soon as the workers walked out, the government moved aggressively to crack down on the strike. On the third day, Education Minister Dominic Cardy locked out over 3,000 education workers and shifted all schools to online learning

overnight. Around 45 percent of the province's education assistants, who had been designated "essential" and thus prohibited from participating in the strike, were placed on leave without pay with a day's notice. On the eighth day of the strike, Higgs then seized on the COVID-19 state of emergency powers to criminalize strike action by over 2,000 cleaners and custodians in the health care sector.

A subsequent ruling by the New Brunswick Labour and Employment Board overturned the government's decision to suspend the "essential" education assistants without pay.

Higgs and his ministers have also employed flat-out lies, claiming that the strikers receive gold-plated pensions that are no longer sustainable. In fact, the school bus drivers and custodians whose guaranteed pension rights are being targeted obtain average annual pensions of between \$8,000 and \$11,000, far below the poverty line.

Moreover, a recent labour arbitration case revealed that the supposed crisis in the pension system touted by the government to justify the introduction of a "shared risk" model was in fact deliberately provoked by Higgs himself. Labour arbitrator Elizabeth MacPherson ruled that the New Brunswick government intentionally underfunded the pensions of 1,900 custodians, bus drivers and maintenance workers represented by CUPE Local 1253.

MacPherson noted that the government's actions violated the collective agreement and drove the pension fund into a deficit of \$69 million by 2018. She ordered the government to pay \$5.5 million each year for 15 years to make good the shortfall.

The government's ability to confront the workers with such ruthlessness is possible above all due to the role played by CUPE, which is keeping the strike isolated and preparing to sell it out. Despite massive votes in favour of strike action in late September, CUPE delayed the job action for almost a month, allowing the government to prepare its offensive. Under conditions where the strike enjoys enthusiastic popular support, in spite of the inconveniences the dispute has had for families, the CUPE leadership is doing all it can to block a mass mobilization against the Higgs government

and keep the public-sector strikers fighting alone. Such a political struggle, challenging the capitalist austerity imposed by successive governments, is the only way striking workers can secure their demands.

CUPE New Brunswick leader Steve Drost offered no advice to striking health care workers after they were ordered back on the job. Cynically invoking the “autonomy” of union locals, he refused to support the workers under conditions where the government was threatening them with fines of up to \$20,400 for every day they defied the back-to-work order. Instead, CUPE filed a court case against the law, which is due to be heard Monday.

At the same time, Drost told Higgs that if the pair concluded a deal, he would order all workers back to work the next day without even so much as a vote. Drost and his negotiators have repeatedly reduced their wage demands from the modest starting point in a series of backroom talks with the Higgs government. In its latest climb-down, CUPE accepted the government’s derisory wage offer of 2 percent per year over a five-year deal, with only one change, that the minimum increase of 25 cents per year be raised to 50 cents for the last two years.

In its refusal to resist the Higgs government’s back-to-work order, CUPE is treading a well-worn path. Trade unions have docilely rolled over on dozens of occasions over recent decades whenever the ruling elite has deployed anti-democratic back-to-work legislation to enforce attacks on workers’ wages and benefits. In April, CUPE Local 375 left striking dockers at the port of Montreal defenceless by refusing to challenge the Trudeau Liberal federal government’s draconian back-to-work law that maintained the brutal conditions of exploitation demanded by the port operators.

CUPE’s bitter hostility to waging a genuine struggle for improvements in wages and working conditions flows from its corporatist ties to governments at the federal and provincial level, and to the capitalist state apparatus. As a member of the Canadian Labour Congress, CUPE sees itself as a “partner” of big business and the political elite in keeping Canadian capitalism “competitive” and defending corporate profits. During the pandemic, CUPE and the rest of the unions have played a critical role in suppressing and sabotaging opposition among education staff, health care workers and other public sector employees to being herded back into unsafe workplaces in the name of the ruling elite’s homicidal policy of “living with the virus.”

CUPE underscored its subservience to the ruling elite once again this week with its decision to suspend all picketing in New Brunswick Thursday for Remembrance Day. The break would give strikers the chance to “reflect on the importance of our rights and freedoms, which include the right to

strike,” the union claimed in a letter.

The suggestion that Remembrance Day—a militarist pageant that has its origins in the ruling elite’s efforts to exploit the bloody mass slaughter of World War I to whip up Canadian nationalism and build popular support for new wars—has anything to do with workers’ right to strike is absurd. The promotion of this lie by CUPE goes hand-in-hand with its pro-capitalist and nationalist outlook, which is why it is determined to do everything in its power to prevent the New Brunswick strike from becoming a political struggle against the government.

Support for such a struggle is building among working people across the country. Ken, a teacher from York Region in Ontario, wrote in a message of solidarity for the New Brunswick strikers sent to the *World Socialist Web Site*, “The government locking out education workers and refusing to pay them a decent wage during a pandemic when front line workers sacrificed so much tells you a lot about who they really serve. What is even worse is that the workers’ union didn’t even bat an eyelash when threats of return to work legislation were issued. Time for the workers to organize and take matters into their own hands. Rank and file committees are really the only way forward.”

Malcolm, a teacher from Vancouver Island, declared in his statement, “Solidarity from British Columbia. The international working class is the only social force on the planet with both the means and motive to end the pandemic. Demand safe workplaces everywhere!”

To prevail in their struggle, striking public sector workers must seize control of the strike from CUPE by establishing rank-and-file strike committees in every workplace. These committees would broaden the strike to other sections of workers in New Brunswick and across Canada who confront the same attacks on their wages and living conditions. This requires above all a political struggle against the policies of capitalist austerity supported by the entire ruling elite, and for decent-paying, secure jobs for all.



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