

Canadian Union of Public Employees conspires with Higgs government to shut down New Brunswick public sector strike

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The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) announced in a brief statement late Saturday that it has reached tentative agreements with New Brunswick's right-wing Progressive Conservative government covering 20,000 striking provincial public sector workers and 2,000 other workers legally barred from striking.

In a clear signal that CUPE has accepted sell-out agreements, Canada's largest union ordered the strikers to take down picket lines and return to work "as soon as possible," without their even seeing, let alone voting on, the proposed contracts.

The union statement makes clear that it conspired with Premier Blaine Higgs and his Progressive Conservative government to shut down the strike without the workers achieving any of their key demands. Fearing rank-and-file opposition to its surrender, beginning with its abandonment of the workers' demand for a substantial "catch-up" wage hike after 15 years of real—after inflation—wage cuts, CUPE is refusing to make any details of the proposed contracts public until ratification votes are complete.

The latest publicly available government offer and union counter-proposal were almost identical. Both proposed pay increases of just 2 percent per year in a five-year contract, with an additional across-the-board pay rise of 25 cents per hour for all job classifications in each of the first three years. The only disagreement was whether the additional increases in the contracts' fourth and fifth years would be 25 cents as the government demanded or 50 cents as CUPE proposed.

Given CUPE's repeated watering down of workers' demands there is no reason to assume it got Higgs to budge from what the premier had provocatively declared the government's "final offer." But even if the union's proposal was adopted *in toto*, the overall wage settlement would still fall well short of inflation, resulting in a further real-terms pay cut for what are already Canada's lowest-paid provincial public sector workers.

In calling off the strike, CUPE also all but announced that it had agreed to Higgs' demand that school bus drivers and education support staff, represented respectively by Locals 1253 and Local 2745, lose their guaranteed pensions and instead be enrolled in "shared risk" pensions schemes. On Friday, CUPE New Brunswick President Steve Drost said union negotiators were in discussions with the government to see "if there's a way they can build in some protections" in a "shared risk" pension plan. Then,

some 24 hour later, CUPE announced that Locals 1253 and 2745 had reached a memorandum of understanding on pensions with the Higgs government, which throughout the two-week long strike has insisted that any settlement would be conditional on their accepting a "shared risk" plan.

Unlike guaranteed pensions, "shared risk" models relieve the government of any responsibility to top up pension benefits if investments go bad on the stock market. In a previous stint as New Brunswick's finance minister from 2010-2014, Higgs with the collaboration of CUPE, the New Brunswick Nurses Union, and other public sector unions, imposed "shared risk" pensions on most of the province's public sector workers. Of the 10 locals involved in the current negotiations, only Locals 1253 and 2745 still had guaranteed pension rights written into their collective agreements.

CUPE's determination to ram through a concessions-filled deal is in keeping with its efforts throughout the contract dispute, which has been dragging on for years, to isolate and demobilize the public sector workers. Its greatest fear was that their militant struggle could become the catalyst for a broader working class challenge, in New Brunswick and across Canada, to the austerity agenda of the Higgs government and the entire capitalist elite.

When Higgs ordered 2,000 striking health care workers back on the job by misusing the special powers granted his government under a COVID-19 state of emergency, CUPE refused to organize any resistance. Cynically invoking the "local autonomy" of each union local and workers' right to determine their own destiny, CUPE NB President Drost asserted that he does not give "orders" to anybody on what they should do. Yet hardly more than a week later, when the union was determined to end the strike and force through a sellout contract, Drost's concern for "local autonomy" and workers democracy vanished. In connivance with Higgs, he and the other CUPE leaders ordered workers back on the job "as soon as possible" and without so much as a peak at the proposed agreements.

The timing of the settlement underscores that the CUPE bureaucrats were deeply concerned that the strike was becoming a rallying point for broad popular opposition to the ruling elite's austerity agenda and criminal mishandling of the pandemic, which has led to the vast enrichment of the financial oligarchy amid unprecedented levels of death and disease for workers. Throughout

the 16-day strike, workers won strong public support at picket lines, with many reports of other workers, parents of school children, and small-business owners bringing food and other donations to the strikers. Daily protests were held outside the legislative building in Fredericton once the legislature resumed sitting on November 2. On Friday, a protest involving several hundred people threatened to develop into a direct confrontation with the government when a group of protesters blocked a vehicle being escorted out of the building by Higgs' security detail.

Also Friday, a group of parents and students launched an organized boycott of online learning in solidarity with the strike. The Higgs government switched schools to online learning on the third day of the strike when it locked out over 3,000 education workers in an aggressive move designed to intimidate strikers, and enforce its attacks on wages and pensions. A Facebook group called "Après le 12 Novembre NON à l'école Virtuel" (After November 12 ... NO to online schooling) was established by a parent of a grade 10 student on Wednesday and attracted more than 1,500 members within 24 hours. A poster was also circulated among students calling on them to boycott online learning in solidarity with the strike. One student joining the boycott told CBC, "I hope that they choose to pay workers what they deserve so we could all get back to our normal routines."

Bobbie Collins, a mother of two, explained that her day care fees went up \$60 per week during the strike after they extended their opening hours. She added that her family suffered a loss of income because she and her husband had to take turns staying home to look after their kids during online schooling. "I hope they get what they want and that they continue to strike for as long as it takes," she commented. "It's a difficult situation for parents to be in, to not have their kids in school. But I also don't think it's fair that these bus drivers and custodians and EAs (education assistants) aren't getting the proper pay that they deserve."

Under conditions of this growing popular anger at the government, CUPE was clearly terrified that continuing the strike into another week could have seen it escalate into a political confrontation with the Progressive Conservative government. A government that, given its role as an instrument of big business and the rich, is appropriately led by Higgs, a former executive of Irving Oil, one of the many holdings of the province's richest family.

A New Brunswick court is due to hear today a challenge to the government's draconian back-to-work order for the health care workers. Drost and his fellow union bureaucrats clearly had no desire to risk a situation in which a court ruling in favour of the workers, however unlikely that prospect may be, could have given a boost to the strikers and forced the government onto the back foot.

Moreover, a strike deadline for almost 600 NB Liquor store employees, also represented by CUPE, expires Tuesday night. CUPE declared over the weekend that it is in the final stages of concluding a tentative agreement for these workers, indicating the union wants to strangle any strike before it even begins.

CUPE's sabotaging of the strike also sheds new light on the politically reactionary role played by the union bureaucracy's promotion of Canadian nationalism and militarism. CUPE New

Brunswick ordered strikers to suspend picketing last Thursday, November 11, to commemorate Remembrance Day—a militarist pageant organized by the ruling class to glorify the imperialist wars of the past and build popular support for future conflicts. In a solemnly-worded note, strikers were ordered by the union to use Remembrance Day to "reflect" on the significance of "our democratic rights, including the right to strike."

In the spirit of the "labour peace" that pro-war trade unions imposed on the working class of Europe during World War I, under which they suppressed all strikes so as to give the bourgeoisie of every country a free hand to ruthlessly advance its imperialist ambitions, CUPE's one-day "truce" only applied to the workers. CUPE reopened talks with Higgs Thursday afternoon, when a negotiating session lasting several hours was held. A further round of talks took place Friday and ran "into the wee hours of Saturday," according to CBC. Having ordered strikers to "reflect" on the value of their "democratic rights," CUPE bureaucrats stepped up their conspiracy with Higgs and his henchmen to overturn them.

New Brunswick's public sector workers should decisively reject the tentative agreements brought back by CUPE. But to prevail in their struggle for improved wages and conditions, the most urgent political task facing public sector workers is to break free of the union's suffocating grip and establish their own independent, rank-and-file forms of organization. Only by taking control of the struggle into their own hands will public sector workers be able to mobilize the broadest possible public support for their demands for decent-paying, secure jobs for all. The events of the past several weeks in New Brunswick have once again illustrated that such a fight must be waged as a political struggle in opposition to the ruling elite's agenda of capitalist austerity and their agents in the trade union apparatuses.



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