

CUPE's sabotage of the New Brunswick public sector strike—the political lessons

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2021 witnessed an upsurge of the class struggle in Canada and around the world. Workers in all economic sectors, from miners and manufacturing workers to meatpackers, teachers and day care workers, organized strikes, walkouts, and other forms of protest to demand wage increases after decades of concessions and improved working conditions amid the raging COVID-19 pandemic.

The two-week work stoppage by over 22,000 New Brunswick public sector workers was the largest all-out strike in Canada during the past year. Education assistants, school custodians, bus drivers, community college employees, health care staff, and others won widespread sympathy and active support from large numbers of workers. The strike was sabotaged by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), with the imposition of new contracts that failed to address the workers' core grievances, and at the very point where it was beginning to evolve into a direct political confrontation with Premier Blaine Higgs' hard-right Progressive Conservative government.

The New Brunswick public sector workers' strike exemplifies the political and organizational questions faced by all workers entering into struggle against the ruling elite's demands for more austerity and increased exploitation and its homicidal back-to-work/back to school policy amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Above all, it demonstrates that workers must take up a political struggle against capitalist austerity to achieve even their most immediate demands, and that this struggle can only be waged independently of the pro-corporate trade unions.

The public sector workers had gone without a pay raise in 15 years. They began their struggle demanding a wage increase "catch-up" of 20 percent over four years. In the end, CUPE accepted a 2 percent per year "increase" over five years, plus an annual raise of 25 cents per hour. Even accepting CUPE's optimistic boast that this formula would translate into a 15 percent wage hike over five years, this falls well short of inflation, which is running at about 5 percent per year, meaning workers will receive a real-terms pay cut.

The Higgs government also got its way on pensions, the other major issue in the strike. CUPE negotiators reached a memorandum of understanding with the government effectively empowering it to transfer the two groups of workers still eligible for defined-benefit pensions to an inferior "shared risk" pension scheme, which removes any obligation for the government to guarantee pension rates. The level of hostility among the workers to this plan was shown by the fact that Local 1253, representing 1,900 school custodians and maintenance workers, voted to reject it. Having isolated the custodians, CUPE responded to their rejection vote by refusing to resume the strike or even setting a strike deadline, thereby making clear that the union is intent on ramming through the concessions rejected by the workers.

Emboldened by the union's actions, Higgs has already served notice that the government will press for sweeping concessions on work-rules, so as to sweat more from workers, especially those who provide health care, during the next round of negotiations. These are set to begin in a matter of

months as the workers were without contracts for four years or more. "Going forward," the premier declared, the government's focus will be "on innovation and changes in our workplace and in our work habits."

Urgent political lessons must be drawn from this experience, especially by the hundreds of thousands of educators and support staff in Ontario who will confront their own contract battle in 2022, autoworkers and parts employees who face an onslaught from globally-mobile corporations to gut their wages and conditions, and workers from coast to coast throughout the private and public sectors who will be driven into struggle by stagnant wages, sharply rising prices and employers' refusal to properly protect workers from the pandemic.

Workers face a political struggle

The first lesson is that workers fighting for better wages and working conditions, amid a pandemic that has been used by the ruling elite to expand its vast wealth and intensify the exploitation of working people, are immediately posed with political tasks. From the first day of their strike, the New Brunswick public sector workers confronted the intransigent opposition of the capitalist state, its institutions and political parties. On day three of the strike, the New Brunswick government intervened to indefinitely close schools across the province on the cynical pretext of a lack of safety and sanitary guarantees due to walkouts by custodians and maintenance workers. Coming from a government that has steadfastly refused to close schools throughout the pandemic to stop the mass infection of children, teachers and their relatives, this move was a clear attempt to whip up public sentiment against the strikers so as to impose the government's austerity demands.

On day eight of the strike, Higgs himself intervened to order health care support workers back on the job, making use, or rather misuse, of the emergency powers his government has as a result of the health emergency. Higgs, who has served as finance minister and premier of governments that have starved the province's health care system of resources, claimed that his strikebreaking action was aimed at safeguarding hospitals' ability to offer emergency services. Any worker defying the draconian ban was threatened with a daily fine of up to \$20,400.

The state's role as the spearhead for the enforcement of the attacks demanded by the ruling class on working people has been demonstrated again and again over recent months. In April, the Trudeau federal government stepped in to criminalize a strike by Montreal dockworkers against brutal working conditions and a lack of job security. In Quebec, a months-long struggle by Olymel meatpackers was strangled in August after the Coalition Avenir Québec provincial government intervened to force the acceptance of a rotten contract with the support of the trade

unions. In Ontario, the Ford provincial government and federal Trudeau government are offering billions of dollars in subsidies to the Detroit Three automakers as they slash jobs as part of their transition to electric vehicles, as was shown most recently by the axing of 1,800 workers at Stellantis' Windsor Assembly Plant in October.

The trade unions are bitter enemies of the working class

The second lesson is that the trade unions are not the allies of workers in the struggles they are waging, but their bitterest enemies. These organizations are beholden to corporate management and the capitalist state. For decades, they have trampled on the traditions of militant working class struggle with which they were once associated and imposed capitalist austerity and concessions, while integrating themselves ever more fully with management and the capitalist state. They are adamantly opposed to the mobilization of working class power and the independent political struggle required to secure better wages and defend and expand workers' social rights in the face of ruling class demands for austerity and "competitiveness."

The unions connive in all the attacks demanded by big business, merely requesting that well-paid union bureaucrats be involved in drafting and implementing them. This is dressed up with constant references to protecting "collective bargaining" and the "labour relations system," which in reality means the access of the union bureaucracy to co-management structures in government offices and corporate boardrooms. This has found its clearest expression in the unions' enforcement of the ruling elite's open economy/open schools policy during the pandemic, which has led to the mass infection of workers and thousands of preventable deaths.

In New Brunswick, CUPE, Canada's largest trade union with over 600,000 members, sought at every turn to isolate the public sector workers' struggle. It delayed the calling of a strike for months, even though the workers had been without contracts for four years or more and had overwhelmingly backed strike action. When the strike got under way, the union scrupulously avoided making any appeal to its hundreds of thousands of members, let alone the working class more broadly, and instead encouraged workers to engage in stunts to influence MLAs and government officials. CUPE responded to Higgs' back-to-work order for health care workers by filing a grievance in the capitalist courts, a move aimed at demobilizing the workers and encouraging illusions in the capitalist state.

CUPE pursued this strategy because it knew the public sector workers enjoyed mass popular support. Even CUPE's own reports on strike picketing were forced to acknowledge that strikers were flooded with donations, including financial support as well as food and other items, by local residents.

Despite the union's best efforts, popular support for the strike took on increasingly organized form. The day before CUPE announced a sudden end to the strike on November 13, thousands of parents, students, and their supporters began an organized boycott of online learning in solidarity with the strike. The CUPE bureaucrats were clearly terrified that a further development of the struggle along these lines would have rapidly led to an open political confrontation with the Higgs government, undermining their cozy relations with the premier and his ministers.

Determined to end the strike, the union, in what is now standard practice, violated the most basic democratic norms. As soon as union officials reached their sellout agreement with the government, they ordered workers to take down their picket lines and return to work. Over the next three days they held snap ratification meetings at which workers

were forced to vote on the tentative agreements without any chance to study their contents or debate them among themselves.

Workers must build rank-and-file committees and unify their struggles internationally to win their demands

The third lesson is that workers entering into struggle are in a powerful position to mobilize the social power of the working class and win their demands. The coronavirus pandemic was a trigger event, exacerbating the already far advanced capitalist crisis and all of its attendant social ills, including low wages and ruthless exploitation of working people and the vast accumulation of wealth for the super-rich. The brutal and murderous policies pursued by provincial and federal governments in Canada, and governments internationally, to prioritize the protection of corporate profits ahead of human lives during a deadly pandemic has politicized and radicalized millions of workers around the world.

These objective processes have driven an upsurge in working class struggles that has not been seen for over four decades. The New Brunswick public sector strike was part of a wave of working class struggles across North America, including strikes by workers at Volvo Trucks, John Deere, and Kellogg's in the United States, and Vale miners, Arcelor-Mittal mining and smelter workers, and Olymel food processing workers in Canada. A key feature of all of these struggles was that they developed as rebellions of rank-and-file workers against the union bureaucracy's efforts to impose the employer's dictates.

But striking workers must learn to transform this objective strength into conscious political power. It is not enough to merely be angry and frustrated with the betrayals of the trade unions and the ruthless pandemic policies of the ruling class. What is required is an organized form through which to coordinate and provide political leadership to every strike and job action, wherever it breaks out, and a political perspective to guide these struggles. Workers at Volvo Trucks, the auto parts manufacturer Dana, and John Deere took the first step in this process by forming rank-and-file committees independently of, and in opposition to, the corporatist trade unions. Workers in every economic sector, public and private, must follow this example to secure victory in the coming class battles.

To provide the global coordination and political leadership that these struggles require, the International Committee of the Fourth International, of which the Socialist Equality Party is its Canadian section, has established the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). We strongly appeal to all workers entering into struggle to support the construction of the IWA-RFC as the conscious leadership of the mass working class struggles that will develop in the immediate period ahead. If these struggles are to break the domination over social and political life enjoyed by the financial oligarchy and secure decent-paying, secure jobs and protection against COVID-19 for all workers, they must be guided by a socialist and internationalist perspective.



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