

Teamsters and NDP laud back-to-work legislation against striking Newfoundland ambulance workers

Carl Bronski
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Full private sector ambulance services were restored across rural Newfoundland on Tuesday evening after a bill was signed into law that ordered an immediate end to a four-day strike by 120 drivers and paramedics, represented by Teamsters Local 855. The provincial government has for many years funded privately owned ambulance companies to cover Newfoundland's expansive rural areas. There are 25 private and 22 community-owned ambulance operators. The government pays them a total of \$34 million in block funding for their services.

The four-day strike was directed against seven of those providers, owned by local businessman Bob Fewer. Initially, the workers had undertaken a work-to-rule campaign but after management victimized a worker for his participation in the job action, all workers walked off the job. Local volunteer fire departments buttressed by some ambulances from any available and nearby public health authority provided basic emergency coverage during the strike.

Public sector ambulance workers, largely based in more urban locations, have for many years been subject to restrictions on all-out strike activity. Before they can gain the legal right-to-strike, their union and employer must agree on the designation of a specific number of workers as "essential" making it illegal for them to walk off the job.

With the passage of Bill 24, the province has for the first time extended the "essential employees" limitation on workers' right-to-strike to a section of private sector workers.

Bill 24 also makes private ambulance drivers and paramedics subject to provisions of the province's labour code under which an employer or union, citing

an impasse in contract negotiations, can appeal to the provincial Labour Board to impose one through binding arbitration.

The new law was supported by all three parties in the provincial Assembly—the big business Liberal government plus the Conservative opposition and the New Democratic Party. All applauded enthusiastically when the legislation was passed. The Teamsters themselves campaigned for the back-to-work law, establishing a reactionary new principle that opens the door for potentially any group of private sector workers to be subjected to restrictions on their right to strike.

Moreover, by supporting the legislation the Teamsters union has opened the door for the current dispute to be ended under the binding arbitration of the notoriously pro-company provincial Labour Board.

The drivers and paramedics employed by Bob Fewer are severely underpaid and have no pension plan. One striker told reporters that her brother, who works at a fast-food outlet, makes more money per week than she does. The ambulance workers are also required to finish any run that goes beyond their scheduled shift time without any additional payment.

The workers, without a new contract since 2020, worked diligently through the early ravages of the COVID-19 pandemic. During that whole period, Fewer slow-walked negotiations for months on end, even failing to attend a crucial session during a government ordered conciliation process.

Undoubtedly, the poorly paid ambulance workers perform an essential public health function. It is thus a travesty that they should be working for a private employer whose only concern—as his callous conduct of the contract negotiations has underscored—is to swell

his own bank account. For both the government and the private owner, the workers are “essential” except when it comes to their salaries, benefits and working conditions.

The rush by the Teamsters to embrace legislation that further curtails the right to strike and elevates the use of binding arbitration in the labour courts is the standard operating procedure of the union.

In last year’s strike by 3,000 Canadian Pacific Rail engineers, conductors and yard workers, the union bowed to pressure from the company and the federal Liberal government and accepted a process whereby a government-appointed arbitrator would dictate CP Rail workers’ terms of employment. Without any consultation let alone a vote, the Teamsters ordered the 3,000 workers it bargains for to return to work only 36 hours after they had walked off the job, and ceded their legal right to mount any job action until the still-to-be determined contract expired years hence. Predictably, the arbitrator imposed a miserable 3.5 percent annual pay “increase” over a two-year deal, which with inflation at running at twice that rate constitutes a huge real-terms pay cut.

The reliance on a pro-corporate, state-appointed arbitrator to determine workers’ “collective agreements” is now the go-to response from the Teamsters bureaucracy. Eight out of the nine most recent labour disputes at CP have been “resolved” through arbitration, ensuring the profits-before-safety policy of the railways remains fully intact. And in virtually every case, the union itself sanctioned, if not welcomed, binding arbitration. In 2019, during a powerful strike at Canadian National Railway, the Teamsters completely capitulated and ended the strike after the government threatened to illegalize the walkout.

The anti-worker legislation against the ambulance workers comes under the shadow of looming attacks by the Newfoundland Liberal government on the province’s health care system. Already, more than 20 percent of the population has no family doctor. Nursing shortages in the hospitals have reached crisis proportions. Despite this, the government is moving to implement key recommendations of its 2021 Premier’s Economic Recovery Team (PERT) Report (also known as the Greene Report). Among a long list of reactionary measures, it called for a massive 25 percent cut to the

operating grants to provincial health authorities and further steps to privatize the health care system.

Amongst the most far-reaching recommendations is the demand that the government renegotiate compensation packages with public sector unions. The “key elements” covered involve converting pensions “to a collective defined contribution plan in three years,” a wage freeze and draconian changes to work practices. The report also demands that “in the event that a negotiated settlement is not possible, the Provincial Government should use legislation that will be effective.”



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