

Strike by 51,000 Alberta educators enters 3rd week as Smith government threatens back-to-work legislation

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Approximately 51,000 teachers in the Canadian province of Alberta are in the third week of strike action after taking to picket lines on October 6. In June 2025, 95 percent of teachers voted in favour of strike action. The job action affects around 750,000 students in 2,500 public schools across the province. The teachers are demanding better working conditions, smaller class sizes, support for students with additional needs, and increased salaries.

The walkout by Alberta educators is part of a growing wave of working class struggles across Canada. In recent months, Air Canada flight attendants, Canada Post workers, Ontario college support staff, and public sector employees across British Columbia have engaged in strikes against years of austerity, wage stagnation, and deteriorating conditions.

With teachers making clear their determination to fight for their demands, the government of far-right United Conservative Party (UCP) Premier Danielle Smith has pledged to pass back-to-work legislation to outlaw the strike if a settlement is not reached before the provincial legislature resumes business on Monday, October 27.

Smith's UCP government is spearheading one of the most reactionary political agendas in Canada. Since taking office in 2022, Smith has slashed health and education funding, undermined public sector bargaining rights and intensified attacks on public services and social support. Her rhetoric and political agenda echo that of fascist US President Donald Trump, whom she openly idolizes and has repeatedly visited. She has positioned Alberta as a bastion of right-wing "freedom" in pursuit of profit against environmental regulations, public health and workers' rights.

School divisions in Alberta fall into three categories: public, Catholic and francophone. All are considered public education and fall under provincial funding and oversight. The teachers in all three categories are members of the same union. The two organizations involved in the bargaining process are the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) union and the Teachers' Employer Bargaining Association (TEBA). TEBA represents the provincial government as well as the local school boards.

The collective agreement covering members of ATA and the provincial government expired on August 31, 2024. The teachers had been working under the terms of the previous 2020-2024 agreement for more than a year. From 2019 to 2025, salaries have increased by only 3.8 percent. In the same period, the CPI (Consumer Price Index) in Alberta has increased 20.8 percent. In other words, teachers' earnings have declined in real terms year after year. New teachers are most adversely affected. According to the salary grid used by both the

finance minister's office and ATA, new teachers in Alberta have an inadequate starting salary of \$65,136. Of all the provinces in Canada, only Ontario elementary school teachers have lower starting salaries.

While salaries are a major point of contention, general learning conditions are an even bigger concern. Alberta teachers report high levels of work-related stress. According to the 2024 Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), 42 percent of Alberta teachers say they experience "a lot" of stress in their work, more than double the international average of about 19 percent. Over 90 percent say their workload has become increasingly unmanageable since 2019.

Weekly hours are high: teachers in Alberta work on average 47 hours per week, which is among the highest of the over 60 education systems surveyed. A major complaint cited by teachers and parents alike is increasing class sizes. Between 2019 and 2024, many cities in Alberta have experienced strong population growth. Enrolment has grown by almost 89,000 students, while the number of teachers has barely changed. Another common complaint is the lack of supports for students with extra needs.

The combination of high stress, heavy workloads and insufficient compensation has led to high burnout levels. The retention rates are dropping, and an increasing number of teachers are considering exiting the profession, moving to a different province or retiring early. Exit interviews with teachers leaving their positions reveal that they retain a strong commitment to teaching and care about their students; but the work conditions make it too difficult to continue psychologically, emotionally and physically.

According to a survey conducted by the Angus Reid Institute, most Albertans have sided with the teachers in the current contract fight. Three in five (58 percent) have said that their sympathies lie with the teachers, while only one in five (21 percent) sided with the government. Four in five (84 percent) have said that the classes are currently too large.

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently interviewed an Alberta teacher with 11 years of teaching experience. Asked about his experiences, he said: "I am a trained teacher, and I am part of the ATA. When I got into the profession, I was told at the time there was a 60 percent attrition rate within the first five years. And things haven't gotten better. I struggled: huge classes, lots of complex behaviours, not enough funding, not enough support. I had a grade 8. I had like 34 students per class, which is just way too many. The 60-hour work weeks, the time you must put in after work on your own, the extracurriculars, the expectations, the parents—it's just

unmanageable. And the money isn't that great. I think I'm making only slightly more money now than I made 10 years ago, which, you know, with inflation, everything is crazy."

Asked about how his colleagues were coping with current work conditions, he responded: "So I'm seeing teachers who have struggles. I am talking to them sometimes and I'm just seeing like, there's teachers leaving every year trying to find new jobs. If you talk to teachers, every teacher I know, all my colleagues, all my friends, it's class size, it's complex behaviours, it's lack of funding, it's work-life balance... Even things like teachers getting hit by students is just a normal day in school. Teachers want rules and guidelines put in place.

"It's actually a very dire situation in education. Teachers' mental health is very low. We have teachers burning out all the time, taking stress leaves, taking medical leaves, not able to cope in the classroom, needing support throughout the day. I just see a really bleak future if things don't change. Classes keep getting bigger, behaviour is getting more complex. And, yeah, I just think that there needs to be a serious intervention into public education. I'm not sure about the quality of education the future is going to have, in Alberta at least."

Given that the ATA does not provide strike pay, the teacher expressed the following concerns: "It's very, very challenging. One thing about teachers is, they often marry other teachers. I'm part of a teacher group, you know, just for support and for sharing. And the vibe is like, we have to keep going, we have to keep pushing here.

"But another part of it is we are kind of questioning now, where have all our ATA union dues gone? Because there hasn't been a strike since 2001, and that's like millions of dollars in union dues that you would think there might be some sort of strike pay. We're not getting a lot of communication. We had an update last week and it was like a few sentences, and it basically said they had a frank conversation with the government and at this point we've already been off work for a week and that was our update for the week."

Facing a large budget deficit of \$6.5 billion, the Smith government is not interested in seriously addressing teachers' demands. On the contrary, both the UCP provincial government and the Liberal federal government, led by Prime Minister Mark Carney, a former central banker, are determined to shift the burdens of government deficits, low economic growth and the impact of tariff wars onto the backs of the working class.

For example, when Air Canada flight attendants went on strike in August, the Carney government intervened and ordered the flight attendants back to work. A bold defiance of the back-to-work order by the rank and file was sold out by the Canadian Union of Public Employees in a backroom sellout deal with management and the government.

Before the teachers' strike, TEBA had made an offer of a 12 percent salary increase as well as promising to build new schools and hire 3,000 educators over a four-year contract. Extrapolating from the projected 2025 CPI, this would mean virtually unchanged earnings in real dollars over the life of the contract. Moreover, the government and the TEBA are opposed to any binding language in the contract that would guarantee maximum classroom sizes. In other words, the hiring of additional staff amounts to a vague promise that can be rescinded at any time. ATA has rejected the offer, knowing it would be voted down by its membership.

The ATA, closely aligned with the New Democratic Party (NDP), is seeking to confine the strike within narrow legal and procedural channels. Its leadership, many of whom have long-standing

connections with the NDP establishment, is hostile to any broader mobilization of the working class. When in power in Alberta (2015–2019), the NDP government of Rachel Notley imposed its own austerity measures on public education and healthcare, laying the groundwork for the current crisis. The union's appeals to Smith to "negotiate in good faith" are aimed not at mobilizing teachers for a genuine fight, but at preserving the privileges the bureaucracy derives from its "seat at the table."

Following in well-trodden footsteps, the ATA leadership suggests to its members that a militant posture and public pressure can be leveraged to extract concessions from the right-wing UCP government. Recent experiences by other sections of the working class in Canada demonstrate that this is far from true. The only way forward for the strikers is to broaden their strike to other sections of the working class, turning it into a mass mobilization in opposition to public spending austerity, the explosion of military spending, and attacks on worker rights.

The strike is not taking place in a political vacuum. Governments around the world—including Canada's—are moving rapidly to the right under the pressure stemming from mountains of debt and the rising costs of military rearmament. Their prerogative is to make the working class pay for the crisis of capitalism; public sector workers are a prime target. For union bureaucrats, talking about such topics is taboo. They studiously avoid linking the struggle faced by their members to the larger struggles experienced by other workers, teachers internationally, or even teachers in other Canadian provinces.

Aside from noncommittal proclamations of solidarity, unions in the same country and in the same industry will not join forces and strike together. There is a clear class logic to this: the union leadership's chief concern is preserving their corporatist ties with the government and big business within a narrow nation-state framework and keeping workers tied to the pro-employer "collective bargaining" system. This means that, despite militant left talk, their first loyalty is to the state and to ensuring the "competitiveness" or profitability of Canadian capitalism.

However, teachers in Alberta and elsewhere are far from powerless. They are part of a growing international movement of workers standing up against the gutting of social services and the deepening social inequality fostered by capitalism. Their struggle poses the urgent necessity of building independent rank-and-file committees that can unify workers across Canada, the United States and globally in a common fight for decent wages, public education and social equality.



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