

Alberta government runs roughshod over democratic rights to illegalize strike by 50,000 teachers

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Alberta's United Conservative Party (UCP) government is carrying out a massive assault on the democratic rights of more than 51,000 public school teachers and education workers. In the wee hours of Tuesday morning, after just a half-day of debate, it adopted draconian legislation—Bill 2, The Back to School Act—that illegalizes a three-week strike at the province's public schools (regular, Catholic and French-language) and imposes a concessions-laden, four-year contract on teachers that they overwhelmingly rejected last month.

The legislation invokes, for only the second time in Alberta history, Canada's anti-democratic "notwithstanding clause." This enables Canada's federal, provincial and territorial governments to adopt laws that violate the democratic rights supposedly guaranteed under the constitution's Charter of Rights and Freedoms, including the rights to strike and bargain collectively.

Under the Back to School Act teachers are legally compelled to return to their classrooms Wednesday morning. Any teacher who refuses to comply will face fines of \$500 per day. The Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) along with other unions are threatened with penalties of up to \$500,000 if they support "illegal" job action.

Recognizing the widespread public support for the teachers and their fight for improved education funding and staffing, Alberta Finance Minister Nate Horner vowed Monday there would be "consequences" for any workers who joined sympathy walkouts in support of the teachers.

A North America-wide class war

The attack on the Alberta teachers is part of a class war being waged by the ruling elites on the working class across North America. In the United States, the would-be Führer Donald Trump is erecting a presidential dictatorship to gut worker rights, as shown by the ongoing government shutdown that has laid off hundreds of thousands of workers, and the plan to allow food stamps to expire for tens of millions of people.

The Canadian ruling class has responded to Trump's "America First" tariffs and threats to annex the country by shifting massively to the right. Over the past year, Liberal governments under former Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and current Prime Minister Mark Carney have criminalized strikes of transport and Canada Post workers on the basis of a concocted "reinterpretation" of an obscure clause in the Canada Labour Code. Following Ottawa's example, Quebec has adopted legislation (Bill 89) that robs private and public sector workers of the right to strike by expanding the definition of "essential services" and giving the Labour Minister the power to unilaterally illegalize strikes.

Governments at all levels in Canada and the US are slashing social spending to the bone to pay for rearmament, war, and the enrichment of the financial oligarchy.

Carney has vowed to impose a ruthless cost-cutting budget November 5 under the banner of "austerity and investment." The former central banker now cites the government-backed plan to eliminate up to two-thirds of the 55,000 jobs at Canada Post as a benchmark for the kind of brutal restructuring planned in all economic spheres, but particularly public services like education and health care, and social supports.

The intensification of the class struggle in Canada underscored by the growth in strikes, and the mass protests erupting in the US against Trump point to the social force that can defend democratic rights and oppose capitalist austerity and war—the North American working class.

As is always the case when governments attack education workers, Alberta Premier Danielle Smith claimed to be acting in the interests of school children and hard-pressed parents in imposing her Back to School Act. Although her government has refused to negotiate class-size caps, she insisted that it recognizes teachers' concerns and would establish a "Class Size and Complexity Task Force" to address them, even as she used state power to strip teachers of the right to fight for smaller classes, increased staffing and a living wage.

Smith herself was not present for the final vote on the bill. She had already departed for a trade mission to the Middle East, where she will meet with top officials of Saudi Arabia's absolutist monarchy—an entirely fitting setting for a premier who has just enacted one of the most anti-democratic laws in modern Canadian history.

The strongest criticism that Alberta New Democratic Party (NDP) opposition leader Naheed Nenshi could muster was to denounce Smith as a "coward" for "trampling on workers rights" as she missed the final vote to catch her plane to Saudi Arabia. Nenshi and his party hope they can return to power in the province on a wave of worker anger while having no intention of meeting teachers' demands. Under former NDP premier Rachel Notley from 2015-2019, school boards across the province saw effective cuts in per-student funding, support staff shortages, growing class sizes and stretched services.

Teachers have demonstrated extraordinary resolve in their fight against the far-right Smith government. Their strike was driven by exploding class sizes, chronic understaffing, burnout-level workloads, and real wages that have eroded year after year.

Last month, teachers voted by more than 89 percent to reject a tentative agreement pushed jointly by the government and the ATA bureaucracy. That agreement, which the government is now imposing by authoritarian means, provided for a 12 percent wage increase spread over four years, well below what teachers have lost and will lose in real-dollar terms due to inflation; and manifestly failed to address the crisis of overcrowded

classrooms and the severe shortage of educational assistants and mental health supports.

Teachers rejected this deal despite the union leadership's insistence that it represented "the best available." Due to its energy resources, Alberta is Canada's wealthiest province, yet per-capita funding for public school students is the lowest in the country.

The UCP government's illegalization of the teachers' strike and invocation of the authoritarian "notwithstanding clause" to shield it from any court challenge is a response to the unmistakable fact that rank-and-file educators showed they are prepared for a serious fight.

The ruling class fears that this struggle could become the catalyst for a broader working class movement across Canada.

Smith's UCP is a far-right formation, with closet ties to the province's oil barons and other corporate interests and an activist base drawn from Christian fundamentalists, Alberta separatists and the reactionary anti-public-health "Freedom Convoy" movement that menaced Parliament and blockaded border crossings in 2022. Smith has openly appealed to Donald Trump to exempt Alberta from his trade war measures against Canada, offering to put the province's oil and gas wealth at his disposal in establishing global "energy domination." Her political project is entirely aligned with the global far-right's drive to destroy public services, eliminate all regulatory restrictions on corporate profit-making, suppress all working class struggle and criminalize dissent.

Sensing mass anger, the Alberta Federation of Labour (AFL) and the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) have made promises of "unprecedented collective action" in response to the UCP's back-to-work law and invocation of the notwithstanding clause.

AFL President Gil McGowan declared Monday night on social media that the entire labour movement was preparing to intervene, and CLC President Bea Bruske is traveling to Alberta on Wednesday to "pledge national support." But these demonstrations of supposed solidarity are designed not to mobilize workers, but to contain and diffuse the struggle. They are aimed at channeling teachers' back within the politics and structures of the capitalist establishment—dead-end court challenges, token protests, behind-the-scenes negotiations and get-out the NDP vote drives for an election not slated until October 2027.

Immediately after Bill 2 passed, the ATA signalled its submission to the back-to-work order. In a written statement it declared, "Our message to the government is simple ... Our struggle to achieve our legitimate objectives will continue by other means," adding that it will "pursue all legal alternatives." That is, teachers will be forced back into the classroom under threat of crippling fines, while the union drags out symbolic court filings that will take years and accomplish nothing.

The union bureaucracy has acted time and again as chief enforcers of government strike bans, including against postal workers, rail workers, dockers and public sector workers.

On the two occasions when pressure from rank-and-file workers forced union leaderships to reluctantly sanction defiance of back-to-work orders, they connived behind the scenes to stab the workers in the back at the first opportunity. This was the case for 55,000 education support workers in Ontario in 2022, who, after courageously defying a strike ban and precipitating a movement for a province-wide general strike, were sent back to work under a deal with the right-wing Ford government that met none of their demands. Less than a month later, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) rammed a concessions-filled contract down the workers' throats.

And it was also the fate of Air Canada workers this August. After defying a Liberal government strike ban, they were callously betrayed, with union leaders conniving with government officials and Air Canada executives to impose a contract that continues the practices of unpaid work and gruelling scheduling. Under the sweetheart deal negotiated by CUPE, workers were denied even the right to vote on most of the

collective agreement, and stripped of the right to strike.

The way forward for teachers

The critical question now is how teachers in Alberta can defy the Smith government's authoritarian strike ban. They must first recognize that defiance requires a political class struggle that mobilizes the independent political and industrial power of the working class, since they would not only be challenging the legislature's reactionary back-to-work order, but the entire agenda of corporate Canada and its political spokespeople.

The conditions for building this movement are favourable. Hundreds of thousands of workers have engaged in strikes across Canada over recent months, and millions more workers are struggling under stagnant wages, precarious employment, and the destruction of public services on which they depend. Fighting to broaden the struggle by drawing on this mass support would create the basis for a worker-led counteroffensive to break the power of the financial oligarchy and establish workers' governments committed to socialist policies that prioritize the social needs of the vast majority and worker rights, not the accumulation of ever greater corporate profits and the waging of imperialist wars.

To make their defiance of the Smith government the catalyst for this struggle, teachers require new democratic organizations—rank-and-file committees, controlled by education workers in every school and district. These committees must coordinate mass walkouts, appeal to nurses, postal workers, auto workers, university staff and others facing similar attacks, organize mass demonstrations across the province and advance demands for real wage increases, fully funded public schools, smaller class sizes and expanded support services.

Above all, they must take the struggle beyond Alberta's provincial borders by unifying with education workers, public and private sector workers across Canada and workers in the US entering into struggle against a similar assault on their livelihoods.

The path forward is the construction of a network of rank-and-file organizations linked across workplaces, provinces and national borders. Such a movement already has a framework in the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), which is fighting to unite workers globally in a struggle against austerity, inequality and war.



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