



Canadian Centre for  
Policy Alternatives  
Manitoba Office

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## Manitoba Youth Crisis Workers Left in Limbo

**M**anitoba Government and General Employees Union members at Macdonald Youth Services (Local 221), who provide crisis intervention services to youth and families in Winnipeg, walked off the job on August 2, 2016. This move was not undertaken on a whim: strike action is the last resort in any negotiation and is an indication of the level of frustration that these members have reached.

Local 221 has been without a contact for over two years, and the new government has failed to communicate with the union on this issue. Working in a stressful environment, providing crucial mental health and crisis services with comparatively low wages has resulted in high turnover rates. Winnipeg Regional Health Authority workers who provide similar services to adults make approximately \$10 more per hour.

On August 18th workers signed a Return to Work Agreement, allowing them to get back to the crucial job of protecting vulnerable youth, many of whom are in, or close to, crisis. But they are still a long way from having a new collective agreement.

The Province funds the youth crisis program and Macdonald Youth Services (MYS) – the employer – administers the funds and provides the services. But the current government refuses to follow through on a commitment by the previous government to increase funding for four years, totalling about \$24,000 per year. This is difficult to accept when other agencies in the non-profit sector have received a four year collective agreement with a two percent wage increase in each year of the agreement. It is doubly frustrating given the importance of the work these employees perform.

When at-risk youth need swift and profes-

sional interventions to keep them safe, it is these workers who mobilize. Last year, the Mobile Crisis Team made nearly 1,500 visits to help families and youth struggling with self-harm, at-risk behaviors, mental health issues, and parent/child conflict and assess and stabilize sexually exploited youth. They work with numerous other organizations including StreetReach, Child Welfare agencies, Winnipeg Police, Children's Emergency and schools to provide early intervention services in the community.

Last year alone there were over 275 referrals so youth and families could receive short-term therapy and 560 referrals to Crisis Stabilization Units. The average age of youth seeking help is 13 years.

The employer has been supportive of the bargaining position of members, so much so that it offered to use its own surplus to fund the increase. But the new government will not allow MYS to use the funds for that purpose, stating that "Unfortunately the NDP routinely created false and unrealistic expectations on broader funding commitments in labour relations matters".

Why would the government be unwilling to consider a modest cost-of-living increase for workers, already underpaid in their sector, who perform such important work? The above quote takes us to the crux of the matter.

From introducing Bill 7, *The Labour Relations Amendment Act* (which aims to eliminate the "card-check" system of union certification) to the Premier's goal of eliminating use of Project Labour Agreements, this government has taken a more adversarial stance with workers. The effects of this stance are now showing; this is the first

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**Aug 29, 2016**

ERROL BLACK CHAIR  
**EBC**  
IN LABOUR ISSUES

**“Why would the government be unwilling to consider a modest cost-of-living increase for workers, already underpaid in their sector, who perform such important work?”**

time in almost 20 years that members of the MGEU have had to go on strike.

In fact since 2000, labour stoppages (lock-outs and/or strikes) for provincially regulated employees have grown fewer, shorter and have involved fewer workers. 2001 marks the highpoint, with 11 stoppages resulting in 2,442 workers being locked out, or on strike for 26 days. Both these measures have decreased steadily; in fact there were no work stoppages in Manitoba in 2012. In 2014, there was one stoppage, with 18 workers locked out or on strike for 5 days.

Compared to other provinces, Manitoba had the 2nd lowest average of work stoppages between 2000-09. In 2014, the number of person days lost<sup>1</sup> was 90 (2nd lowest again), compared to 1,223,320 in BC and 124,500 in Ontario. While it is true that both these provinces have far more workers than Manitoba<sup>2</sup>, our population is not so much smaller as to explain such a difference. And Saskatchewan, with its similarly sized population, had 9,650 person days lost in the same year. Between 1990-2000 in Manitoba, when the Progressive Conservatives were in power, the average person-days lost to work was 64,220, compared to Saskatchewan's 54,220. During this period the NDP was in power in Saskatchewan.

Now that both provinces are under conservative governments, Manitoba may take a page from Saskatchewan's anti-union playbook. If so, things are about to heat up in Manitoba. In 2008 Premier Wall brought in the *Public Service Essential Services Act*, defining public services so broadly that almost any public-sector worker could be considered essential and unable to strike. This legislation was so draconian that it was struck down by a Federal Court Judge in

2014. In 2008 Saskatchewan also brought in *The Trade Union Amendment Act*, drastically curtailing workers' ability to unionize and engage in collective bargaining.

This anti-union legislation is just one example of the wave of attacks on labour that has swept North America over the past 30 years, a wave that Manitoba has been somewhat sheltered from. But Premier Pallister may be taking off the gloves when it comes to dealing with workers, and claiming that the NDP had fostered “unreal expectations” is just part of the narrative he needs to justify the coming unrest.

If any party is harbouring unreal expectations, it is this government. Why should workers' wages be eaten away by inflation while they work day after day in trying circumstances to keep at-risk youth safe? Why should the public have to endure work stoppages and cuts to service just because Premier Pallister has a bone to pick with hard-working Manitobans?

Manitoba's youth and their families have suffered far too many tragedies; it's time to negotiate a deal with Local 221 members so they can receive fair compensation for the crucial work they do.

It's also time for the new government to demonstrate that it can keep labour peace in Manitoba while maintaining an acceptable level of service.

<sup>1</sup>Number of workers locked out or on strike, multiplied by the number of working days

<sup>2</sup>It should be noted, however, that Manitoba's union density is higher than these provinces, so a greater percentage of Manitoba workers are able to go on strike or be locked out.

*Lynne Fernandez holds the Errol Black Chair in Labour Issues at the CCPA MB.*

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