



Canadian Centre for
Policy Alternatives
Manitoba Office

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New report finds Manitoba workers more impacted by COVID than nationally



301 - 583 Ellice Ave.

Winnipeg, MB

R3B 1Z7

204-927-3207

lynne@policyalternatives.ca

www.policyalternatives.ca

Nov. 1 2021

ERROL BLACK CHAIR

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IN LABOUR ISSUES

Last month over 100,000 workers in the United States engaged in some level of strike activity, either preparing to strike or actually joining picket lines. Meanwhile, record numbers of mostly low-wage US workers are quitting their jobs, rejecting poor pay, hours, and working conditions by seeking job opportunities elsewhere.

Some have called this surge in American working-class militancy “striketober” (a combination of the words “strike” and “October”). Others have dubbed it the “Great Resignation.” Whatever the preferred term, the sources of this militancy can be found in COVID’s disruption to normality combined with a tight labour market and the frustrations of thousands of workers, above all those deemed to be essential, who have watched corporate profits soar while wages have failed to keep pace with inflation.

But what about workers closer to home? Are the actions currently being taken by large numbers of American workers a harbinger of things to come in Manitoba? Data compiled in a new report published by CCPA Manitoba “Rising Together or Falling Apart” report – which examines the impact of the first full-year of the COVID pandemic on workers in the province – shows that many of the same sources of discontent among workers south of the border are also present in Manitoba.

While the wealth of billionaires in Canada increased by \$78 billion during the first year of the pandemic, thousands of workers risked their health and well-being to provide the many goods and services that we rely on everyday. Workplaces accounted for 25 percent of COVID-19

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infections in Manitoba over a six-week period during the second wave of the virus, following the ill-advised efforts on the part of the current Manitoba government to re-open the economy and ease restrictions. Workers' compensation data shows 1,200 confirmed COVID-19 workplace transmissions over the course of the first year of the pandemic, a number that does not include, for example, eligible workers who did not file a claim or who were denied.

Health care and food manufacturing workers were among the hardest hit by the pandemic in Manitoba. Large COVID-19 outbreaks in these sectors were deemed preventable if not for budget-cuts and short-staffing along with government and company inaction.

Yet it is the public sector in Manitoba that has proven to be a true outlier during the pandemic. In May 2020, following a series of controversial work reductions and layoffs, public sector unemployment increased dramatically relative to national rates. These cuts reveal a long-term trend of persistent government action aimed at undermining public sector unions. This is exemplified by Bill 28 (Public Services Sustainability Act), legislation which, among other things, seeks to limit wage increases to a maximum of 0.75 percent and 1 percent in years three and four of any public sector collective bargaining agreement. Although the ultimate fate of Bill 28 may still be determined in appeal by the Supreme Court of Canada – and while some public sector unions have successfully fought back against the wage freeze mandate – the massive number of expired public sector collective bargaining agreements is both a sleeping giant and a creation of the government's short-sighted labour policy.

The "Rising Together or Falling Apart" report cautions strongly against a post-pandemic economic recovery model based on austerity in favour of substantial investment in physical and social infrastructure, with a special role for the public sector, as parts of a green transition. Further recommendations from the report include:

- **Focus on the creation of good jobs along with training and educational opportunities for young workers, aided in part by the repeal of anti-labour legislation and the regulation of the gig economy;**
- **High priority placed on occupational health and safety with a call for the immediate legislated implementation of ten paid sick days for all Manitoba workers and the expansion of worker voice through joint workplace health and safety committees to deal with matters of work organization and job design;**
- **Substantial overhaul of the Employment Insurance system in order to better meet the needs of workers today.**

Rising Together or Falling Apart? The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Manitoba Working Class by Saku Pinta is available for download at www.policyalternatives.ca/Manitoba.

Saku Pinta holds the Errol Black Chair in Labour Issues at the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives Manitoba Office.

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References available upon request.