



Fast

FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES – MANITOBA

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Manitoba Wage Wars

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Since forming government in 2016, the provincial Conservative government has aggressively pursued a policy of austerity. Working people in particular have been the targets. Yet during the pandemic, it has become fully apparent to everyone how crucial “ordinary” day-to-day workers are to the successful functioning of our economy and society. We all depend upon each other.

Nevertheless, early in their first term the Pallister government introduced Bill 28, the Public Services Sustainability Act, which set aside the collective bargaining rights of over 100,000 public employees. The result has been court challenges, stalled bargaining, layoffs and a steady stream of budget cuts.

In the midst of the most significant global health pandemic in a century, front-line health care workers, despite being called heroes, have been unable to negotiate wage hikes through collective bargaining.

Multiple editorials have called this situation a “charade,” demanding “respect” for public employees.

Last June, in a 224-page decision, Court of Queen’s Bench Judge, Joan McKelvey, struck down Bill 28, and offered a blunt assessment of the legislation:

“The PSSA has effectively removed union rights to collectively bargain any monetary terms or benefits.”

“It is a strident, inflexible and rigid

approach to labour relations.”

“The Government has violated the unions’ S. 2(d) of the Charter with respect to the rights of public sector employees and the collective bargaining process.”

In areas of public sector bargaining not directly controlled by the Province, the government has interfered directly by extending its austerity agenda to these negotiations.

For example, a three-week strike at the University of Manitoba in 2016 was, according to a Labour Board ruling, caused by the unfair labour practice on the part of the government.

In 2020 the Manitoba government’s attempts to impose a bargaining mandate on the Louis Riel School Division failed. An arbitration board, established to settle teachers’ bargaining ruled, “as an independent arbitration board, we must be responsible in fashioning an award but, as explained earlier, we must not allow government’s mandate to dictate the result.”

In September 2020, the Province wrote the Winnipeg School Division to suggest a 0 per cent, 0 per cent mandate for bargaining between the school division and its bus drivers. The result was a two-month strike, followed by the workers accessing a provision of the Labour Relations Act (LRA) that allows the dispute to be settled by an independent

there is an alternative.

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arbitration award. The process is currently underway. Of note, in October 2020 the government introduced legislation to remove the arbitration provision of the LRA.

Ironically, wage freezes do not exist throughout the entire Manitoba public sector.

On April 1st, 2021 the Premier and all MLAs will receive their third salary increase since his government was first elected in April 2016.

Pursuant to the Legislative Assembly Act (2007), an appointed Commissioner decides on “appropriate salary, allowances and retirement benefits” for the Premier and all MLAs.

In his 2017 Report, Commissioner Michael Werier concurred with principles of remuneration adopted by another provincial report:

“it is recognized that the principal objective is to recommend compensation that is fair and reasonable to the Members who work in the Legislative Assembly, and understandable to the taxpayers to whom they are accountable. Members should be remunerated in total in a manner that is commensurate with the duties, responsibilities and importance of their role.”

This is as it should be. A fair level of remuneration and regular inflationary adjustments for elected officials are both important and justifiable principles.

So too is similar treatment for front-line public employees.

In December 2020 we learned that another government compensation directive had been acted upon. The instruction that Manitoba Public Insurance negotiate with insurance brokers for a slice of on-line auto insurance renewals resulted in a five-year deal by which brokers will receive a portion of all renewals, including those in which they play no role.

Former MPI President and CEO, Jack Zacharias, in a recent letter to the editor

said, “Brokers will now get paid for doing nothing, and since they are paid on a fixed commission percentage, their commission for doing nothing will increase by approximately three per cent per year.”

Brokers contracted by MPI will get what amounts to wage increases for five years at the same time the government has instructed MPI to negotiate wage freezes for in-house staff.

The pursuit of tax cuts and austerity by the Manitoba government has come at the expense of the day-to-day workers who keep our economy and society running.

This is happening at a time when all Manitobans can see how crucial to our collective wellbeing “ordinary” workers really are. Down this path lies labour unrest. Wouldn't it be better if our elected government were to support the people whose work we all depend upon?

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