

Newfoundland public sector strike enters sixth day

By a reporter
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In response to sweeping concession demands from Newfoundland's Tory government, 20,000 provincial government employees walked off the job April 1, launching the largest strike in the province's history. While the media have generally portrayed the strike as a dispute over wages, the strikers have made it clear that they view this as largely a fight against job cuts and privatization.

Less than 48 hours before the strike began, the Tory provincial government tabled a budget calling for the elimination of 4,000 public sector jobs over the next four years, beginning with the axing of 1000 jobs this year.

Tory Premier Danny Williams, himself one of Newfoundland's wealthiest businessmen, has threatened to ram emergency strikebreaking legislation through the provincial parliament, if the workers continue to resist. "If I have to protect the health and safety of the people of this province, then I have to use whatever means are necessary," declared Williams shortly after the strike began.

Williams, who led the Tories back to power last October after 15 years in opposition, has repeatedly baited the strikers and their unions. Without any evidence whatsoever, Williams publicly suggested that strikers might have been responsible for a barroom ball last week in which his son suffered a concussion and several broken bones. The strikers, Williams told a press conference, "will be out until the cows come home if they go near any members of our families."

On the weekend, Williams said the government would escalate its concession demands if the striking unions—the Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Public and Private Employees (NAPE) and the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE)—didn't accept new contracts by Sunday at midnight. However,

on Monday, after thousands of union members had marched through the streets of the provincial capital, St. John's, the government agreed to resume negotiations.

The strike erupted after months of increasing attacks by the new government on public services and the jobs and wages of the workers who administer them. One of the Tories' first actions on taking office was to announce a government spending freeze. Then on January 5, it imposed a public sector wage and hiring-freeze.

These measures have been widely condemned and support for the government as measured by opinion polls has dropped dramatically.

Such is the depth of anger among the public sector workers that the president of NAPE Leo Puddister has felt compelled to say he would counsel defiance of a Tory back-to-work law. "In the event that [Williams] resorts to the legislature, I will say to [union] members that you should not go back to work," Puddister told a rally of strikers last Thursday.

The Tories have justified their concession demands and job-cut plans, which are a repudiation of their election promises, by pointing to a ballooning budget deficit of \$840 million.

Initially union negotiators had sought pay hikes of 21 percent over four years, to catch up for a decade of wage austerity under the Liberals during the 1990s. But they have since agreed to accept a two-year wage freeze and are asking for wage hikes totalling 15 percent in the last three years of a five-year contract. The Tories have offered 12 percent, but also want the union to accept the job cuts and concession on pensions, sick leave and hours of work for school board workers.

The strikers work in a range of public service

positions at government offices, hospitals, nursing homes, schools, the public college system, ferries, liquor stores, and on the province's highways.

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