

PROTECTING PUBLIC SERVICES DURING THE PANDEMIC AND BEYOND

Use this checklist to spot the increasing threat of privatization and to spot contracting in opportunities during the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery.

Corporations will be trying to take advantage of the COVID crisis by pitching privatization. The pandemic highlighted the importance of public services to keep Canadians healthy and safe, but some cash-strapped employers may be vulnerable to a sales pitch for contracting out, public-private partnerships (P3s), or other privatization schemes. Other employers may be looking to offload responsibility for a service or program they don't want to administer or don't want to negotiate with the union to deliver.

The COVID-19 recovery must put workers and the public interest first. We should be strengthening and expanding our public services and facilities, not funding corporate profits.

We can resist privatization by being on alert for threats, and for opportunities to bring services in house. Here's how:

BE ALERT

Budgetary problems

An employer in financial difficulty may consider privatizing even though privatization costs more and delivers less.

- Does your employer have increased expenses related to COVID-19?
- Have your employer's revenue sources decreased because of COVID-19?
- Was your employer having financial difficulty before the pandemic?
- Are there options for financial support available to your employer?

Layoffs or redeployments

Reduced or frozen staffing levels could set the stage for privatization

- Has your employer laid off workers because of the pandemic? If yes, how many? What departments or types of work were affected by layoffs? Did these layoffs affect full-time, part-time, temporary or seasonal workers?
- Have workers been redeployed to other service areas?
- Has your employer implemented a hiring freeze? If yes, how many positions have been affected? Which departments or types of work have been affected? Do the freezes affect full-time, part-time, temporary, or seasonal workers?

Cuts to public services

Public services cuts could lead to privatization

- Have public services been cut, suspended, or cancelled in response to COVID-19?
- Which types of services have been affected?
- How will this affect the public?

Emergency legislation and by-laws

Changes to procurement rules or collective agreement protections because of emergency legislation could set the stage for privatization

- What changes have resulted from emergency legislation for your employer (e.g., workforce redeployment, public service levels, collective agreement protections)?
- Has emergency legislation suspended collective agreement protections against contracting out?
- Has your employer hired additional staff during the pandemic to do bargaining unit work? Has your local negotiated a Letter of Understanding about any staff hired while the collective agreement was suspended?

Contracting in

If workers are laid off, are there opportunities to bring contracted out work back in house?

- Is your employer putting out tenders for newly contracted out work? Could this work be done by workers who are laid off or by hiring additional workers?
- Could your employer cancel private contracts and redeploy workers instead of laying them off, bringing work back in house?
- Has COVID-19 highlighted any problems with contracted-out services? Could there be an opportunity to contract in work such as landscaping, cleaning, food services, or IT?

BE PREPARED

Monitor your employer

- Get volunteers to take turns watching all public meetings of the employer (municipal council, agency, board, etc.).
- If no one can attend, review meeting agendas, minutes and reports.
- Monitor tenders your employer releases asking companies to bid on work.
- Build relationships with local elected officials and senior staff.

Identify corporations and contractors

- Watch for companies meeting with your employer or other decision-makers to pitch their services.
- Watch for consultants like KPMG, Ernst & Young (EY), PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), Deloitte or MaRS meeting with your employer or other decision-makers. Consulting firms make millions advising public sector employers to privatize while also working with corporations ready to step in and profit from privatization.
- Watch for representatives of a federal or provincial privatization agency like the Canada Infrastructure Bank, SaskBuilds or Infrastructure Ontario meeting with your employer.
- Identify contractors who already operate at your workplace and think ahead to other work they may go after.
- Find out when contracts expire and look for opportunities to bring the work back in house.

Review your collective agreement

- Go over your collective agreement language on contracting out and contracting in to see what protections and opportunities exist.
- Enforce your collective agreement where the employer is violating clauses protecting bargaining unit work.

TAKE ACTION

Spread the word

- Build awareness about the privatization warning signs through virtual or in-person conversations, your local's web site and social media, email bulletins, and virtual or in-person local meetings. Always follow health and safety COVID-19 protocols and local public health guidelines.

- Share this checklist! Talk to your staff representative about online workshops to help your members learn more.
- Build communication networks that let you quickly share information and hear back from your members.

Promote public services

- Throughout the pandemic, public service workers have shown strength, resiliency and heart. Public services have expanded to meet the needs of the public in creative and thoughtful ways.
- Share stories that show how strengthening public services helps us build strong communities.

Build relationships

- Build relationships with local elected officials, other unions in your workplace and other community leaders or groups.
- Have regular meetings, either virtual or in person, with individual councillors, trustees, or any other elected officials that have influence over your employer.

Connect in your community

- Reach out to members of the public who may be feeling the effects of COVID-19 service cuts. By showing that we care and are involved in the community, we put a public face to our work.
- This lays the groundwork for strong local coalitions and builds the alliances we need to defend public services.

If you spot a warning sign of privatization, or an opportunity to contract in work, spread the word. Talk to your steward, anti-privatization committee and local executive. Make sure your CUPE staff representative knows what's going on. They'll help you assess the threat and connect you with other staff in education, communications and research to develop a plan.

For more information on privatization, visit cupe.ca/privatization

*This checklist was developed based on a resource developed by In the Public Interest, a US anti-privatization advocacy organization.

June 2021

