

BC attack on support services a warning for other provinces

In 2002, the British Columbia government launched an all-out attack on health support workers and collective bargaining, an attempt to clear the way for mass privatization of public health care. It's part of a much broader attack on poor people and working people that also zeroes in on other public services for cuts and corporate sell-offs.

The BC government agenda is a direct attack on the most vulnerable, including immigrant women, poor people, students, seniors, Aboriginal people, people of colour and people with disabilities.

Empty promises

During the last election, BC Liberal Premier Gordon Campbell promised to protect health care and respect contracts. He lied. The BC government is planning the biggest mass layoff of women workers in BC history, terminating about 20,000 health jobs as the first step to privatize \$700 million in services. Another 7,500 jobs are to be chopped in both clinical and support areas as a result of service cutbacks. Many of these women are workers of colour and new immigrants.

Some of those workers may be rehired into privatized jobs, but at drastically reduced wages. This undoes decades of struggle for pay equity. Communities across the province will also take a direct hit – the economic impact of wage cuts alone could top \$150 million a year.

Tearing up contracts

In January 2002 the government rammed through a law known as Bill 29. Bill 29 strips workers of hard-won rights and protections, tearing up contracts negotiated by members of the Hospital Employees' Union/CUPE.

Under Bill 29, health support workers lost their job security and contracting out protection. There is no consultation and no protection when work is sold to the private sector. Contract provisions restricting layoffs were also stripped from collective agreements. Bill 29 gutted bumping rights and wiped out gains won through years of struggle that gave community social services workers wage parity with other health care workers. The government has also prohibited unions and workers from suing the government for damages.

The law essentially gives BC health authorities free rein to contract out and privatize health support work. Some have wasted no time. Security services, laundry, dietary and housekeeping workers have all been hit.

Over 3,000 skilled and experienced health care workers have lost their jobs. While the major cuts are behind schedule – thanks to the strong resistance from HEU and a broad-based provincial fightback – as many as 9,000 HEU members are expected to be out of work by mid-2004 as a result of service cuts, facility closures and contracting out.

Closing facilities

The BC government has been ruthless in its attack on communities and their health care facilities, targeting 50 facilities so far. Four hospitals have already been closed and another four are slated for closure. Another six hospitals have lost so many services they're hospitals in name only. A further eight hospitals have been downgraded, meaning they've lost a significant department such as an emergency room, or lost most acute care beds. Two long-term care facilities have been closed, and another 26 are on the chopping block.

Pushing privatization

On the heels of Bill 29, the government brought in a budget that slashed spending for health care and other services to fund tax cuts to the rich. Starving services of cash increased the pressure on health care employers to privatize – and gave some a convenient excuse.

The government followed through in its attack on health support services with an aggressive push for public private partnerships (P3s) in all areas of health care, including hospitals. Privatizing support services is a major source of profit in P3 hospital schemes.

The ground had been prepared for privatizing support services by underplaying and misrepresenting the central role health support work plays in healing. Right wing think tanks compared health support work to hotel work, suggesting health workers were overpaid. The Liberals said the government wasn't "in the business" of services like laundry.

Campbell is privatizing other aspects of the health care system too. Hundreds of types of surgery will be provided outside of hospitals by for-profit clinics. The BC government is also looking for proposals from private companies interested in running the province's public health insurance plan.

Sweetheart deals and union-busting tactics

Multinational corporations, taking their cue from the Campbell government, are organizing their own assault. Public exposure short-circuited Sodexho's secret scheme to prevent HEU members from being rehired after their positions were converted into low-wage, privatized jobs. Sodexho approached another union to try and cut a sweetheart deal, but instead they had the whistle blown on them.

Suspicion of other wrongdoing and collusion abounds. Evidence from one health authority showed Sodexho may have been given the inside track on a deal to privatize management of laundry, housekeeping and dietary services.

HEU has filed freedom of information requests to show the flimsy or non-existent evidence that underpins the government's privatization plan. The requests seek to fully expose the government's cosy corporate connections.

Fighting back

HEU members are fighting back – in the streets and the courts, through community mobilization and organizing drives, building public pressure.

- HEU is working with other unions to challenge Bill 29 using the Charter of Rights and Freedoms to argue the bill robs workers of their right to equality and freedom of association.
- Community campaigns have strengthened local coalitions and local fights to protect public services. These campaigns have helped elect municipal representatives who support public services.
- HEU has successfully exposed the serious flaws and dangerous consequences of the government's privatization schemes, undermining the government's ability to make a coherent case for privatization.
- Where services have been privatized, HEU has fought to organize the workers.