

COUNTERPOINT

FALL 2022

CUPE'S NATIONAL PUBLICATION



FOCUS

The Labour Shortage – A Brewing Catastrophe or a Shift in the Balance of Power Between Employers and Young Workers?

Health & Safety

New Bargaining Guide Paves the Way for Trans-Inclusive Workplaces

Profile

LAURA WALTON
President of OSBCU

Global Justice

Climate Justice: A Public, Fair Future for All

Economy

Smoke and Mirrors and the Truth about Workers' Wages Not Keeping Up with Inflation



POWER SHIFT

Young people reconstructing the world of work in the face of labour shortages and inflation

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GOVERNMENTS NEED TO GET OFF THE BENCH IN THE FIGHT AGAINST INFLATION

By **Mark Hancock** – CUPE's National President

Too many working families in Canada are struggling with their grocery bills and housing costs. As the number of people living paycheck to paycheck climbs, more and more Canadians are wondering when the gouge is going to stop. People are rightly wondering why, after two and a half years of a pandemic, it feels like our governments are leaving us out to dry during an inflation crisis unlike anything we have seen in decades.

Workers didn't cause this crisis. But we are certainly the ones paying the price for it, and young workers are hit even harder.

Meanwhile, governments are watching from the sidelines, acting as if they are powerless to fight inflation and its crushing impacts on working people.

But there are some who are thriving in these inflationary times.

In 2021, grocery chains like Loblaw's saw their gross profit soar by 21% even though their costs only increased by 13%. While Canadians were getting gouged at the pumps, Canada's largest oil producers were recording all-time high profits – up to 10 times what they earned last year.

And corporations aren't the only ones profiteering off these inflation-driven windfalls. Governments are too.

Canada's provincial governments took in a staggering \$76 billion more in revenues than expected in 2021 thanks to inflation. For scale, Ontario spent \$69 billion total on health care in the same year. That's not peanuts.

Simply put, our leaders have the tools and the resources to blunt the impacts of inflation on working people. So far, they have chosen not to. That needs to change.

Governments at all levels need to step up and intervene.

For example, the federal government could curb corporate profiteering by bringing in an excess profits tax. The United Kingdom, whose Conservative government is not exactly a beacon of social democratic policy, recently implemented an excess profits tax on oil and gas. There's no reason we can't do that too.

But another important way that governments can make life more affordable for people is to take those inflation-driven windfalls and invest them in universal public services.

Affordable, reliable public transit saves people money when gas prices are through the roof. Affordable child care ensures children thrive and families make ends meet.

Our system of care is on the brink of collapse after years of underfunding and understaffing. Now is the moment to invest in recruiting and retaining the people who look after us and our loved ones when we are ill or aging.

New Statistics Canada data proves that there is no shortage of workers, just a shortage of sustainable jobs, decent working conditions and decent wages.

Working people are tired and fed up. We were left to fight the pandemic's worst impacts on our health and our wellbeing on our own. Now we are being left to fight the ensuing economic hardships on our own too. That is simply unacceptable.

Our governments should be fighting for us, not against us. But as we are increasingly seeing in Canada and around the globe, workers will not wait for governments to give us a fair deal. We are prepared to organize, bargain and fight for what we deserve. And our younger members are leading that fight.



FIGHTING FOR SUSTAINABLE WORKPLACES

By **Candace Rennick** – CUPE's National Secretary-Treasurer

I have been watching recent organizing drives at corporate giants like Starbucks, Amazon, and Indigo with interest. It is inspiring that this charge has been led in large part by young people standing up and fighting for their rights.

I have been a member of CUPE since I started working at a Peterborough long-term care home at the age of 16. So, I have known my whole working life that young workers – and all workers – do better in a union.

We have seen this play out repeatedly during the pandemic: for workers who didn't have a union to fight for their health and safety on the job, confronting COVID-19 on the front lines was even more dangerous.

Are we doing enough to meet young workers' needs inside our union? The National Young Workers Committee recently ran a survey among our youngest members, and I look forward to hearing about their experiences.

But to make change, we need to find fresh ways to bring young workers together and advance and fight for their demands at the bargaining table. I see lots of inspiring activity in CUPE that is contributing to that effort.

The 2021 historic strike in New Brunswick is a perfect example of what is possible. More than 22,000 workers, some of the lowest paid across Canada, were united in fighting for an increase in pay and fair treatment.

And recently in Ontario, education workers at the bargaining table with the conservative government have tabled a flat rate increase instead of a percentage. CUPE did this years ago through an "up with women's wages" campaign, and it is one strategy we can use to close the gap for those at the bottom of the wage scale, where women, young workers and precarious workers often sit.

These are just two recent examples of mass mobilization at CUPE. We are living through some serious upheaval right now. The pandemic is not over, the economy is volatile, the climate crisis is worsening, and technology is changing how we live and work at an incredible pace.

Ultimately, what is essential for workplaces to be sustainable and attract and keep new workers has not changed much. It starts with respecting and paying workers fairly.

There is no doubt unions are as needed as ever in the struggle to protect workers' rights and to build worker power. But, for the labour movement to grow, we must keep tackling the fight for higher wages, stronger labour laws, and a climate-conscious economy, and we must do so in new ways. For young workers and all workers to thrive, we need to adapt.

I am proud to be in this fight with all of you.

THE LABOUR SHORTAGE – A BREWING CATASTROPHE OR A SHIFT IN THE BALANCE OF POWER BETWEEN EMPLOYERS AND YOUNG WORKERS?

By Myriam Leduc

At the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, there were massive layoffs in various industries in Canada. Thousands of unionized and non-unionized workers across the country lost their jobs, in spite of various government assistance programs aimed at encouraging companies to keep their employees on board.

Two years later, the labour shortage is on the lips of pretty much everyone. Nonetheless, the lost jobs were regained and the unemployment rate has declined.

Current data clearly shows that we have a problem. In the two years prior to the pandemic, there were between 500,000 and 600,000 job vacancies across Canada. This number skyrocketed to 900,000 vacancies by the final half of 2021.





The pandemic not only changed people's relationship with work but also worsened the already inevitable labour shortage due to an aging population and, by extension, an older workforce.

Economists and CUPE have noted that in cases where the number of job vacancies is rising in a sector where compensation remains steady, such as health care, this may be an indication that not enough people are willing to work for the wages offered.

Conversely, in sectors where wages have somewhat increased, such as the accommodation sector, employers still aren't offering enough hours per week for workers to make ends meet.

In Quebec, the crisis is even more acute in certain sectors such as retail and food services, where jobs are generally precarious and working conditions unattractive. Entire industries have been built on cheap labour, and the turnover of young workers continues unabated, as employers have not really shown much appetite to provide better working conditions.

For some time now, the labour shortage has hit the Quebec public sector just as hard, particularly health care and education, which has sparked an unprecedented crisis. Young workers are leaving these sectors in droves, searching for jobs that offer more attractive working conditions and real work-life balance, that recognize their expertise and autonomy, and that are less taxing on their mental health.

In order to ensure the sustainability and quality of public services in the long run, employers must focus on hiring younger employees and paying attention to their needs, particularly by offering fair compensation and benefits, flexible work arrangements and mentorship programs for those who are less experienced.

Even though union organizations have made substantial gains during the last public sector negotiations, the Quebec government has been slow to spearhead a move to bring about long overdue changes to the intangible working conditions of public employees, which would keep young (and older) workers in these essential jobs.

HEC Montréal's *Gestion* magazine recently ran an article entitled "Labour shortage: a brewing catastrophe", which went on to demonstrate that "the labour shortage has a major impact on businesses. A BDC study showed that half of them have trouble finding workers and a quarter have difficulties retaining their employees." This prevents these companies from achieving their growth potential.

But the labour shortage is a catastrophe for whom exactly? For young workers, doesn't this labour shortage rather mirror our choices in a job market that often has little to offer to newcomers to the world of work? One is left to wonder whether a pendulum shift of sorts really is a catastrophe.

The pandemic has also forced employers to review the organization of work to allow employees to work remotely. This democratization of remote work has not only proven its



For young people in the workforce, this labour shortage is an opportunity to underscore the value of their work to employers and demand better conditions.

worth in the past two years, but it has allowed for a better work-life balance, a key priority for young people. In fact, a recent study by the Association of Young Chambers of Commerce of Quebec (Regroupement des jeunes chambres de commerce du Québec, or RJCCQ) found that 66% of young professionals aged 16 to 35 want to work from home all the time, while 33% want a hybrid model and only 1% want to return to the office full-time.

Back in the day, it was commonplace for workers to spend their entire working life with the same company, particularly for the benefits such as a defined-benefit pension plan, which made it very enticing to build a career in one place. However, those in the younger generation are more inclined to change jobs as better opportunities and benefit packages come along.

These workers are seeking work environments where they feel more valued, where they are recognized and consulted, and where they can make a real contribution, at a time when working hours are often fragmented and the boundaries between work and home life have become increasingly blurred.

The challenges that employers are facing are real, but solutions do exist. The question now is what can be done, in 2022, to create a sustainable work environment that makes young workers want to stay?

Perhaps the practice of imposing lengthy probationary periods on new hires and offering fewer benefits to temporary and often younger workers is no longer the solution.

Flexibility, recognition, favourable conditions, work-life balance and social engagement are all winning conditions when it comes to attracting and retaining young workers, and especially in our public services sector which has gone through austerity measures and staff quitting in droves.

Most of these issues are often brought up and defended by unions at the bargaining table, particularly in white-collar and professional settings. Even in these contexts, however, making breakthroughs poses a challenge.

The time has come to perceive labour shortages differently: less as a brewing catastrophe and more as an opportunity to transform the world of work and reverse the balance of power.



REFUSING TO SELL OUT YOUNG WORKERS AT THE HEART OF ONE CUPE LOCAL'S STRIKE

By Gaëlle McNeil



WHEN MUNICIPAL WORKERS AT THE CITY OF MOUNT PEARL, NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR'S SECOND-LARGEST CITY, WALKED OFF THE JOB IN EARLY JULY, THEY DIDN'T EXPECT THEIR JOB ACTION WOULD STRETCH OUT OVER THE LONG HOT SUMMER.

As the weeks went by, there was little relief at the bargaining table, but a whole lot was happening on the CUPE 2099 picket line.

For younger members like Alyssa Broomfield, 26, going on strike was a real eye-opener with regards to how poorly management can behave during a labour dispute. But she was pleasantly surprised at the bonding experience she felt with her co-workers.

"It has been rewarding to get to know the brothers and sisters at my local and to see how bonds of solidarity are created," she said.

Broomfield works as a lifeguard at the Mount Pearl recreation centre where she is one of about 45 lifeguards, most of whom are under 25 years of age. She said of the other 50 or so staff at the centre, most are also under 25.



While many of these young workers are part-timers, Broomfield has been on staff with the city for seven years and was recently made permanent full-time. "I am one of the old hands!" she joked.

But she pointed out that despite her 11 years of experience in aquatics, she doesn't always feel respected by her employer. "As a young person, I feel that my thoughts and experience are constantly devalued by management. I feel undervalued and infantilized," she said.

She added that managers on the bargaining team are not paying attention to the issues faced by younger workers because they are considered "precarious". "They are only interested in the people working in the yard who have been there for 20 or 25 years," she said.

Ryan O'Neill is 27 and works as a heavy equipment operator at the Mount Pearl depot. He operates a lawn mower in the summer and a plow in the winter. He started working for the city at 19 and is one of a handful of young workers at the depot.



"We are committed to the residents of Mount Pearl, we always have been," said CUPE 2099 President Ken Turner in an interview. "But right now, we have to protect our collective agreement. We won't accept a contract that doesn't provide the same rights and benefits for all workers."





O'Neill doesn't believe that new hires should be treated any differently than long-time employees.

"I am a big benefits guy," he said. "I deserve the same benefits as someone new that has just been hired. Everyone deserves what I have, now and in the future."

Maintaining equal benefits for new hires is one of the main issues that CUPE 2099 is fighting for in this bargaining round. The other main issue is a wage increase to keep up with the cost of living.

This is O'Neill's first labour dispute. "It has been hard, but it is not what I expected," he said. "I love the solidarity. We have become very close, and we are really strong. I got to meet people from other departments that I might never otherwise have met."

O'Neill and Broomfield are great ambassadors for the next generation of workers at the City of Mount Pearl. They are strong in their belief that young workers deserve to have good working conditions and benefits, just

as older workers did before them. They are fiercely committed to the fight for a fair agreement.

"If someone hadn't stood on a picket line for me, I wouldn't have the benefits I have now," said O'Neill. "Young people today are the future."

On September 20, 2022, the municipal workers voted in favour of ratifying a new collective agreement with the City of Mount Pearl, putting an end to an 11 week-long strike. "Our members are looking forward to getting back to serving the community they love," said CUPE 2099 President Ken Turner.



CUPE 2099 represents more than 200 municipal workers who work in recreation services, administration, taxation and finance, road maintenance, water and sewage, facility maintenance, landscape maintenance, engineering, and planning. They were in collective bargaining with the city since March 2022.

MUNICIPALITIES FOCUS ON EQUITY IN PUBLIC SERVICES

Last June, more than 2,000 delegates gathered in Regina, Saskatchewan to participate in person in the Federation of Canadian Municipalities' (FCM) hybrid annual conference. Among delegates were members of CUPE's National Executive Board and CUPE staff who took the opportunity to have valuable conversations with mayors, city councillors and other municipal officials from all Canadian regions.

CUPE also hosted a panel session titled "Municipal Funding – an Equity Lens" with panellists Cheryl Stadnichuk, Regina city councillor, Kemi Akapo, Peterborough city councillor, Simon Enoch, director of the Saskatchewan office of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, and Angella MacEwen, CUPE senior economist. National President Mark Hancock welcomed mayors and councillors from across the country to the session.

Moderator Aditya Rao, senior researcher at CUPE, set the stage asking about the impact of the last two years of economic disruption on municipal decision-making and how municipalities can meet residents' needs in an equitable and sustainable way. Panellists engaged the audience with their stories of equity and public services in housing, transportation, child care, and climate action.

They all stressed the importance of conducting community research by going to where people are at, especially marginalized communities, and speaking with them to understand their needs. This is critical in designing environmental policies that are equitable, affordable housing that effectively fights homelessness, publicly-funded child care centres that improve early learning

standards, public transit that is accessible for persons with disabilities, newcomers and everyone else, and policies that fight racism and homophobia and build safe and inclusive communities.

Panellists also highlighted that young people, just like the elderly, feel isolated in rural communities, so being creative in providing other transportation modes and attracting young workers into decent jobs is key – as the future of our municipal services lies in their hands.

"CUPE is proud to have a big footprint in the municipal workforce in Canada, representing 150,000 workers in the municipal sector," said Mark Hancock. With the FCM, we will keep pushing for better financial support for municipalities from higher levels of government.



NEW BARGAINING GUIDE PAVES THE WAY FOR TRANS-INCLUSIVE WORKPLACES

By Tara Paterson





Hailey Fielden, CUPE 606 member.

Library worker Max Hare wasn't necessarily out to their co-workers when CUPE 4948 negotiated a number of trans-inclusive provisions in their collective agreement at the start of 2020. Hare is agender (not identifying with any gender) and uses they/them pronouns. "I didn't actively hide my identity at work, but I didn't actively mention it either," they said.

It wasn't until Hare changed their name at the end of 2020 that people started asking more questions and they felt they could be more open at work. "Everyone was really great and supportive," Hare said of their co-workers at the small Toronto library branch where they worked at the time. "When the collective agreement came out, it felt amazing to see all this gender-inclusive language," they added. "It is so important for people to see themselves and their experiences respected and talked about in the collective agreement. It sends a signal to trans and non-binary workers that we matter to the union."

Two years later, when Hare needed time off work to access gender-affirming surgery, they were able to get paid leave because CUPE 4948 had negotiated trans-affirming care leave – a benefit that has been a lifeline for many Two-Spirit, trans and non-binary workers who have access to it.

Lex Konnelly, a non-binary trans masculine teaching assistant and member of CUPE 3902, said if it weren't for paid leave, they wouldn't have been able to get top surgery. Konnelly spent four years on a waitlist for the procedure. When they were finally able to get a surgery date, they had to travel from Toronto to Montreal, which required taking time off work.



On top of the leave, Konnelly also made use of their local's "trans fund," which helped cover additional expenses. "The thing about gender-affirming care is that even if the procedure itself is covered, there are a whole host of other expenses around that experience – like travel – that without funding we rarely have resources to support," said Konnelly.

Thania Vega, a non-binary member at CUPE 3903, agrees. Without their local's trans fund, they said they would be carrying an additional \$20,000 in debt.

Of course, many Two-Spirit, trans and non-binary people do not feel the need to pursue surgery. But for those who do, Konnelly reminds us, it is often "lifesaving" care. "To have that recognized in our collective agreement, and to be able to get the funding and take the leaves that we need to take is enormous," they added.

While these benefits are available to members of the handful of locals that have negotiated them, the vast majority of workers still don't have paid transition leave or funding for transition-related expenses. Hailey Fielden, an educational assistant from CUPE 606 and diversity vice-president for CUPE BC, is one of them.

They said that figuring out how to get the money to cover costs and time off work for their partner – who is not unionized – and themselves to care for him when he needed gender-affirming care last year was "a nightmare." Contract language which provides for paid leave and expenses can significantly reduce the stress and hardship experienced





by Two-Spirit, trans and non-binary workers. In July, CUPE launched *Bargaining beyond the binary: A negotiating guide for trans inclusion and gender diversity*, to help more locals fight for these types of provisions at the bargaining table.

The guide features sample collective agreement language on a range of issues including harassment, employment equity, gender-inclusive uniforms and dress codes, health benefits, gender-neutral facilities, inclusive terminology, and gender-affirming care leave. It also includes external resources to help bargaining teams learn more about gender diversity and a glossary to help workers understand terms that might be new to them.

It is meant as a tool for all locals, not just those that already have out Two-Spirit, trans and non-binary members. In fact, bargaining gender inclusion might be what allows members to feel safe to come out at work or in their union in the first place.

After CUPE 4948 ratified the agreement that included gender-inclusive language and paid gender-affirming care leave, Vice-President Emma Lee said she received several acknowledgements from members saying they never thought they'd feel safe being themselves at work. "They wrote to me and said how much this meant to them, how they could finally come out, and how it made them want to get involved in the union," Lee said.

Lee was clear that even locals that don't have any trans members (that they know of) should ensure protections and supports are in place now. Waiting for a worker to come out or for a Two-Spirit, trans or non-binary person to be hired is too late. Gender diverse workers shouldn't be forced to wait for the next round of bargaining to address issues they shouldn't have to face in the first place.

Even with the benefits that bargaining provides, it is important to remember that negotiating inclusive language isn't enough to ensure safe and equitable workplaces for gender diverse workers. As Konnelly puts it, "advocating for Two-Spirit, trans and non-binary workers isn't only important at the bargaining table and it isn't something that ends with language in the collective agreement." They want cisgender (non-trans) workers to understand that transphobia is so prevalent "we need that solidarity all the time, every day."

Indeed, CUPE's own research has shown that many trans and non-binary workers are subjected to frequent misgendering and other forms of harassment from co-workers and managers. Workplace harassment is usually even more severe for trans and non-binary people who are Indigenous, Black, racialized, persons with disabilities and/or women. Bargaining the best collective agreement won't be enough to effectively combat transphobia if workers themselves aren't equipped to challenge it in the day-to-day.



Hare, Fielden and Vega all emphasize the importance of education as a tool to compliment bargaining. They have all seen firsthand how training provided by their locals has increased awareness and respect in their workplaces and among their members. Vega noted that the impact is often more powerful when it comes from the union. And CUPE will be piloting a course on creating safer spaces for Two-Spirit, trans and non-binary workers this fall.

It is also important “to support trans leadership and maintain a strong connection with trans members in the local,” said Konnelly. Especially since issues that Two-Spirit, trans and non-binary workers might be facing will evolve between bargaining rounds. “And not to treat these issues as peripheral,” Vega insisted. “These are health care issues. It is about building a culture that understands that workers go through stuff that impacts their lives,” they added.

When asked what advice they had for locals looking to negotiate trans-inclusive collective agreement language, all members we spoke with had the same response:

“Just do it!” Don’t wait. Reach out to locals who have already started. Do your research. Bargaining beyond the binary is a great place to start.

Download CUPE’s guide **Bargaining beyond the binary: A negotiating guide for trans inclusion and gender diversity.**





SEPTEMBER 30 NATIONAL DAY FOR TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION

Making Sure this Federal
Statutory Holiday is
Observed Across
All Provinces

By Rebecca Benson



September 30 is commonly known as Orange Shirt Day. The Orange Shirt Day movement began in 2013 to honour the survivors of residential schools and those who never returned home.

Orange Shirt Day was inspired by Phyllis Webstad's experiences at St. Joseph Mission Residential School, outside of Williams Lake, British Columbia. As a child, Phyllis was given an orange shirt by her grandmother to wear on her first day at the school. The shirt was promptly confiscated and destroyed by her teachers when she arrived.

Phyllis' story has come to symbolize the colonial goal of residential schools to assimilate Indigenous peoples. September 30 was selected as a day of remembrance because it is in the fall, around the time when Indigenous children were forced to attend the institutions.

In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) recommended that a statutory holiday should be created to commemorate the history and legacy of the residential school system. The new National Day for Truth and Reconciliation on September 30 has been established as part of the reconciliation process.

In June 2021, the Parliament of Canada passed legislation to create a new federal statutory holiday, the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation on September 30. This means that day is now a paid holiday for workers in federally regulated sectors.

Unfortunately, most provincial legislatures across Canada have not adopted September 30 as a holiday. Most CUPE members work in sectors that are provincially regulated,

meaning that September 30 is considered a normal working day for many CUPE members across the country. This leaves it up to members and local unions to work toward the observance of September 30 as a holiday in all provinces.

How can you, as a union member, support making the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation a holiday in the workplace?

- Your local may have already bargained the observance of September 30 into the collective agreement, so be sure to check.
- Your collective agreement may already include language that recognizes potential future paid holidays declared by federal or provincial governments. If it does, this language should be enforced with your employer to observe the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation on September 30.
- If your collective agreement does not include any language that can be used to argue for the observance of September 30, then September 30 should be proposed as a paid holiday in future bargaining.

We know that many of our members wonder how to incorporate reconciliation into their everyday lives in actionable ways. One of the ways CUPE locals can support reconciliation

is by bargaining language supporting Indigenous workers into collective agreements. Making September 30 a holiday while at the bargaining table is a good place to start for all locals.

In order for workplaces to be sustainable, they must also include prioritizing steps toward reconciliation and aligning their policies and practices to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Negotiating decent terms and conditions of work is at the heart of a union's mission. Our new guide, *Truth and reconciliation: CUPE taking action through collective bargaining*, provides additional examples of collective agreement language to put reconciliation into action at the bargaining table.

It is the duty of all unions to take actions showing a commitment to reconciliation. Even if no members of your local have self-identified as Indigenous, it is still recommended that your local moves forward on reconciliation initiatives. Building relationships with Indigenous workers is part of building a strong union.

For examples of bargaining language that includes September 30 as a holiday, visit our *Bargaining Language for the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation* resource, and for more ideas of how to support Indigenous workers and reconciliation in the workplace, check out our *Walking the Talk* guide, and our *Truth and Reconciliation bargaining guide*.





PROFILE LAURA WALTON

By Jesse Mintz and Ken Marciniac

ORGANIZING FOR SUSTAINABLE GAINS WORKERS AND STUDENTS NEED

With 55,000 education workers in Ontario currently at the bargaining table for a new central collective agreement, Laura Walton finds herself reminiscing about her father. As a school principal, he pulled out of his bargaining unit during the bad old days of Premier Mike Harris. He walked the picket lines in solidarity with his staff.

“They fought so hard,” says Walton. “I won’t let us go back to where we started with governments dismantling our system, cutting, chipping away bit by bit.”

Educational assistants (EAs), early childhood educators (ECEs), custodians, maintenance staff, office secretaries, music, and language instructors – all members of the Ontario School Boards Council of Unions (OSBCU-CUPE) – are fighting to improve the working and learning conditions in Ontario’s schools. Their proposals are reasonable, necessary, and affordable, and would guarantee real gains for workers and students.

It is a fight Walton is ready for. An Educational Assistant and president of the OSBCU, Walton speaks about what drew her to union organizing, the impact of a decade of wage cuts, and the future of the sector for young workers.

Question 1

Why did you become an Educational Assistant (EA)?

Education is a part of my family. My grandmother was a school secretary. My dad was a principal. My stepmother and uncle were teachers. I knew I wanted to work in schools, but I came up in the 90s when there was a glut of teachers and no teaching jobs. So, I worked other jobs to put myself through university, and when I was pregnant with my daughter, I trained to be an EA.

I always knew I wanted to work with kids. And I loved it, I really loved it. I worked with extremely behaviourally challenged teenagers, many coming out of the criminal justice system and trying to transition back to school. It was rewarding. But I was also working other jobs just to make ends meet. That is when I went to my first union meeting.





Question 2

What does it mean to have a sustainable job as an education worker?

It is everyone's dream – but it should be everyone's reality. Instead, we have uncertainty. In the first few years of education work, it is common to move from school to school. Teachers can spend their entire career in one school, they can put down roots. But EAs, ECEs, custodians, office secretaries – all of us face a question during the summer of whether we will be back in our schools or not in the fall. That level of uncertainty takes a toll on workers.

There is also the question of wages and inflation. How can you sustain yourself and your family, how can you pay for rent or a mortgage, food, and gas, let alone extra-curriculars for your own kids, on these salaries?

More than half our members have second jobs. They do child care at the local YMCA before or after school. They tutor. They work in restaurants. They cobble together enough other work to supplement a job they love, a job they find meaning in, because their main job as an education worker doesn't pay them enough.

My first four years as an EA, I worked at Sears for the benefits. I would work to 9 p.m. every night and barely get time with my own kids. That is not sustainable.

Question 3

What is the impact on young workers? And what role do school boards play in this crisis of retention and recruitment?

That lack of sustainability is the reason a lot of people don't stick it out. They love the work, like I do, like so many do, but they leave the field. Why would they stay?

Governments and employers have devalued this work, primarily done by women. But these women know their value. They know they are worth more than near poverty wages. They say to themselves, 'If I am going to be a gig worker, I will at least do it on my own terms, not the school board's.'

We can't keep young people in these jobs if we don't make them careers people can be proud of – careers people can sustain a family with.

Besides, school boards haven't reacted in time to a changing reality. They are used to being draws. They are used to having applicants line up for jobs. And they thought the applicants would always be there.

Well, we have been telling them for years that these jobs are not sustainable and now they are waking up to a staff retention and recruitment problem. Now they don't have nearly enough people applying and they don't have people staying in roles. Meanwhile, we are doing the heavy lifting, asking for more money from the government to make these jobs more sustainable.

Question 4

Understaffing is also a major issue in bargaining. How does understaffing affect the services you can provide students?

This is one of the pieces we don't talk about enough. The pandemic made people start to appreciate the work of custodians and maintenance staff, keeping schools clean and safe. But that is just the start.

We have schools that used to have four clerical staff and are now down to one secretary. The workload hasn't changed. If anything, the demands have only increased. But that one person has to do it alone.

My last year in the classroom, I had a reoccurring alarm every 15 minutes. That is how long I could dedicate to each student. And these were students who deeply needed the

one-on-one attention. They needed it for much longer than a few minutes, but I just couldn't give it to them. I had to run from class to class, covering the entire primary wing.

I had parents getting frustrated that they weren't seeing the growth they expected in their child. And I understood, I was frustrated too. We couldn't take the time to do the good work that we knew would make an impact. And it has only gotten worse.

Question 5

What do Doug Ford's government's proposals indicate to you about where their values lie?

Their values aren't in our schools. They are not with our dedicated education workers. And they are certainly not with students. They want to offload the hard work of education onto parents, giving parents a small stipend to find a tutor.

This is a government abdicating responsibility to provide a publicly funded and publicly delivered education. Instead, they are forcing parents to source an education like it is a toy off Amazon. That is not sustainable. It is not good for students. And it is not fair to workers. Good education is not cheap and cheap education is not good.

Question 6

Why is it important for you and your colleagues to fight for more sustainable jobs at the bargaining table?

Because it is long overdue. And we owe it not just to ourselves and to future education workers, but to the students and to the families who depend on us.

For far too long, workers have thought that someone else will fight for them. They have thought they can rely on the court system, or the political system, or the bargaining team they elect to negotiate their collective agreement. Nothing in my 20 years here has shown me that any of those mechanisms will work if you don't fight. No one will save us unless we fight ourselves – each one of us, together.



CLIMATE JUSTICE: A PUBLIC, FAIR FUTURE FOR ALL

By **Kelti Cameron** and **Graham Cox**



Demonstrators march through downtown Ottawa as part of a global climate strike in 2019.

Photo: Pierre Ducasse



Climate justice is public. It is increasingly evident that governments who continue to follow the lead of the corporate sector and the rules of the current economic system will be unable to address the climate crisis. The younger generations are particularly clear about the urgent need to save the planet, and that an energy transition to low-carbon alternatives and reduced consumption must not rely on corporations or their market-based “solutions”.

In the process, the legitimacy of exerting pressure on governments through mass actions and in unity with Indigenous and vulnerable communities in the Global South is growing.

Anger and disappointment at the failure of governments to address the climate crisis, while fires blaze out of control, and people and ecosystems die because of rising temperatures and preventable natural disasters, are fuelling a whole new generation of leaders from all sectors of society. How can we support them? How can we join them?

Trade Union Program for a Public Low-Carbon Energy Future

Most agree on the problem, less so on the solution. In advance of last year’s UN Climate Change Conference (COP26), the Trade Union Program for a Public Low-Carbon Energy Future was launched in Glasgow, Scotland. Led by Trade Unions for Energy Democracy (TUED), this program was an important attempt to rally the international trade union movement behind an ambitious political effort to bring about a fundamental shift in climate and energy policy.

It was, and continues to be, a remarkable effort to concretely outline the shift needed to correct the failures of the market model and to ensure that the energy transition is socially just, economically viable, and effective in terms of reaching climate goals.

TUED, with support from CUPE, are advancing pro-public alternatives that challenge the corporate “green growth” agenda and are organizing on the basis that workers and the global trade union movement are critical to their success. Workers around the world are concerned about the impact of the energy transition on their jobs and livelihood, and rightly so because jobs will be affected.

CUPE’s work with TUED has laid the foundation that positions workers not as the victims of the crisis, but as the visionaries who can determine and implement just solutions. Public ownership and democratic control are non-negotiable aspirations.

A Just Transition toward public-sector solutions

As Canada’s largest union, CUPE has been responding to the climate crisis for years. As the crisis grows more intense, it is time to strengthen our position and Just Transition policies are a central part of our response. We have a responsibility to set a positive environmental example, and CUPE members can be part of the solution and help contribute to building a more sustainable economy.

Just Transition is a philosophy of change where workers, their families and communities, and the broader economy, don’t have to be negatively impacted by massive changes to production and work. While all of humanity is confronted with climate change, not everyone contributes equally to the problem and not everyone is at equal risk.

Pro-public solutions include the recognition that a Just Transition must go beyond job creation that ensures “no one will be left behind”. It must also champion public ownership and democratic control over energy, transportation and other essential public services.



In March 2019, CUPE delegates and other union women walked out of meetings of the UN Commission on the Status of Women to join striking New York City students demanding urgent action on climate change.

Photo: Hatnim Lee

Without public ownership and democratic decision-making, we run the risk of relying on the same corporate sector whose promotion of market-based solutions, and commitment to land grabbing and profits at the expense of the planet is what got us into this mess in the first place.

Their interests are fundamentally different than ours and perpetuate social inequalities. Therefore, we must push back in favour of more sustainable ways of working, sharing the benefits of economic transformation and providing decent work for all.

Workers at the heart of the economic transformation

The transition to a zero-emission economy will take massive investment, but just as importantly, a lot of work. Most work on developing systems and services that are resilient to climate change (outside of energy generation, transmission, distribution, and storage) is provided by front-line workers, many in the broader public sector. Upgrading infrastructure, maintaining building environment control systems, and installation of new energy-saving technology to build sustainable work environments is essential in the fight to bring down emissions.

Retaining skilled trades, maintenance, high tech services, and people-focused support services within public institutions is part of the fight for a sustainable economy.

Retaining and recruiting skilled workers is about providing decent wages, safe working conditions, fair and equitable access to training, apprenticeships, and the elimination of precarious employment.

To facilitate a fair and just transition requires us to value the work of those who are making the transition possible.

And we must think highly of not just those who maintain the workplace, but also of those who provide the front-line services to our families while we are at work, train the next generation in schools and universities, transport us to work and leisure activities, and provide the health and welfare services to make sure we can all be involved fully in the positive transformation of our economy to lower emissions.

A lot of money and resources needed to be invested in the transition, and they must benefit people equitably or the transition will not happen. This is as true in Canada as it is in other countries around the world.



Thousands of demonstrators, including a larger number of youth and union members, march through downtown Montreal on September 23, 2022 as part of the annual climate strike that has become a fall tradition since Greta Thunberg's presence at the 2019 strike.

Climate justice as a global priority

Globally, trade unions, faith groups, Indigenous peoples, farmers, migrant and racial justice networks are organizing for climate justice and represent communities most impacted by climate change.

They are often, but not exclusively, in “developing” countries where rich countries, like Canada, outsource production for low-wage labour – usually using more environmentally destructive processes – or where multinational resource extraction is destroying the land and plundering the mineral wealth.

The fight for public ownership of energy in this context calls for our solidarity with democratic movements in these countries and our active opposition to foreign policy and the imposition of Canadian corporations that accelerate the climate crisis or prevent policies to address it.

Implementing a Just Transition means making sure all workers and communities are not only included in the transition, but play a democratic role in deciding how change will occur and who benefits from the investment. The democratic transition process must include the voices and lived experiences of all peoples. And this inclusive transition will incorporate racial, historical, and Indigenous justice into our planning and implementation of a sustainable economy.

Workplaces are where our efforts toward a sustainable economy materialize. Unionized workplaces are laying the groundwork to bring workers into the conversation on best ways to implement a Just Transition in a fair and equitable way.

If we expand this bottom-up, democratic, and inclusive approach to climate justice to all workplaces, we have a chance to develop, share, and coordinate best practices in all corners of our society.

CUPE's work with Trade Unions for Energy Democracy, global trade unions and social movements aims to expand our network and ensure there is a support system for the new generation of leaders that will demand public ownership as a unifying principle for our future.

Download CUPE's updated National Environmental Policy in response to the deepening climate crisis, and address climate justice issues into your collective agreement language at your next round of bargaining.



SMOKE AND MIRRORS AND THE TRUTH ABOUT WORKERS' WAGES NOT KEEPING UP WITH INFLATION

By **Angella MacEwen** and **Colleen Butler**

From groceries to gas to housing, the cost of living is skyrocketing. This increase in prices is called inflation. In 2022, the average inflation rate in Canada is expected to be 8%.

When wages fail to keep up with inflation, workers fall behind. Today, in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, many workers are being hit hard by inflation, making it much more difficult to make ends meet.

In 2021, base wage increases in Canadian collective agreements were well below inflation for all provinces, falling short by an average of 1.5 percentage points. The gap was smallest in British Columbia, where the average wage settlement increased by 2.2% compared with an annual Consumer Price Index increase of 2.8%.

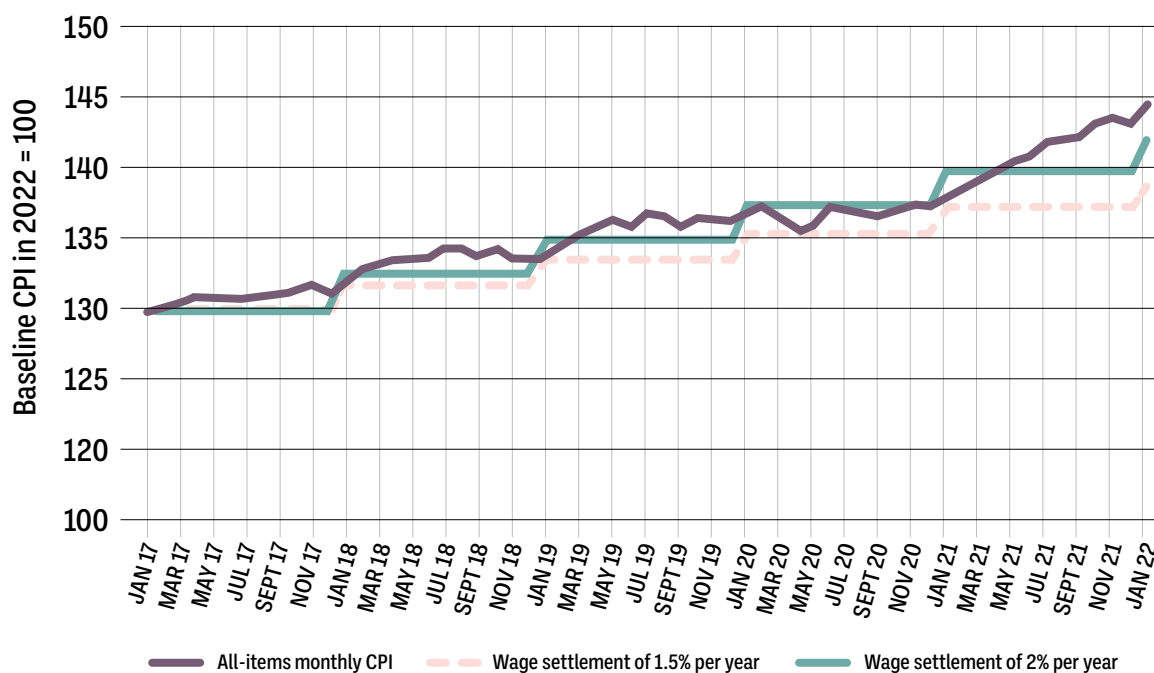
The majority of provinces saw inflation increase close to 2 percentage points above wage growth for the year. This large gap comes from much higher than expected inflation in 2021, as supply chain disruptions lasted longer than expected and many corporations took advantage of pent-up demand to hike prices.

When wage increases don't keep up with inflation, workers lose money – even if their paychecks look like they are getting bigger. To keep up with inflation this year, workers would need to bargain a wage increase over 8% to get an actual raise.

This graph illustrates how a gap between wages and inflation can grow over time. It shows the actual value of the Consumer Price Index from January 2017 to January 2022, alongside two hypothetical wage settlements. It compares a settlement that increases wages by 2% each January with one that increases wages by 1.5%. In the example where wages increase by 2% each January, you can see that while wages fall behind inflation as the months go by, they come close to catching up when the wage increase kicks in at the beginning of the next year. In the example where wages are increased by 1.5%, an amount lower than average inflation throughout this period, workers' wages fall behind inflation by 2019, and face a significant gap by January 2022.



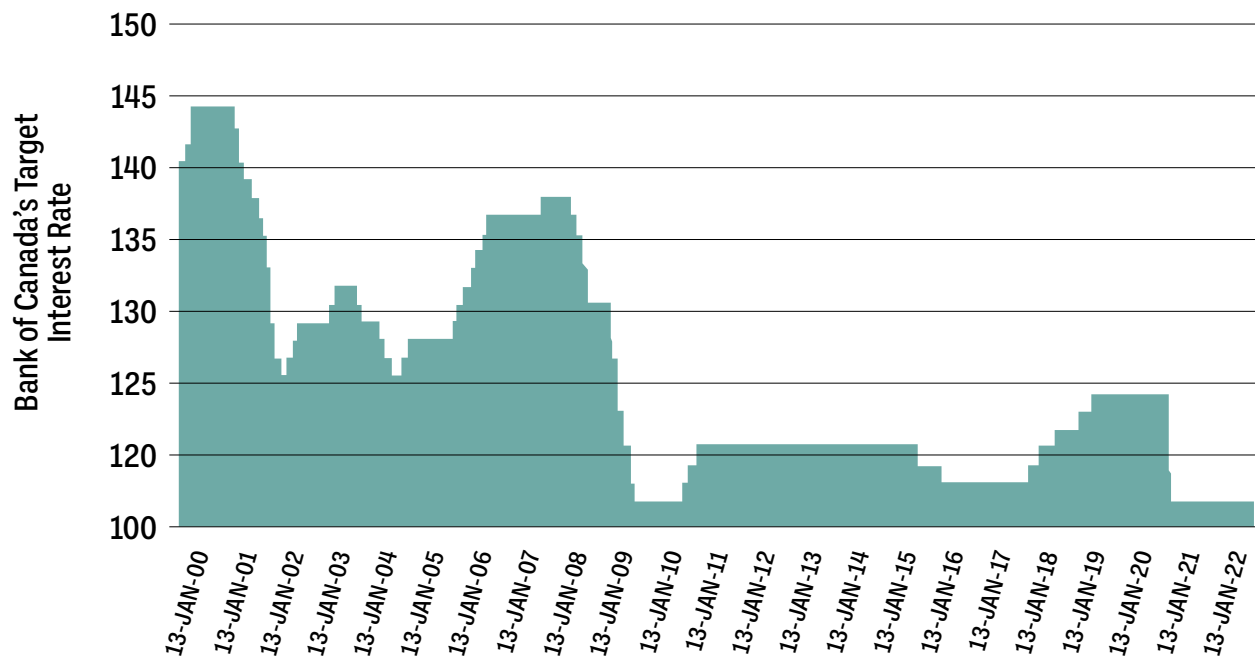
Keeping up with inflation: comparing wage settlements



Source for all-items CPI: Statistics Canada. Table 18-10-004-01 Consumer Price Index, monthly, not seasonally adjusted



Interest rates have been low for over a decade



Source: Statistics Canada. Table 10-10-0139-01

What is causing inflation?

In the 1970s, economists believed that inflation was caused by too much money floating around in the economy. They thought the only way to lower inflation was to keep the amount of money in the economy relatively constant. This approach is called monetarism. Even though monetarism was largely unsuccessful in combatting inflation, it has stuck around as a zombie idea that refuses to die.

Conservative populists still say the Bank of Canada is causing inflation by printing too much money. But the truth is that most money is created when private banks lend money to individuals and businesses. Either way, money creation isn't inflationary in and of itself. Other factors in the real economy play a bigger role.

More money in the economy isn't a problem as long as supply can keep up with demand. For example, if there are enough workers and materials to make a certain product, it will be straightforward to expand production by adding another shift in an existing facility. But if there is a shortage of workers or supplies required to expand production, we might see longer term shortages that result in price increases for that product.

While most analyses of inflation concentrate on demand, current inflation is being driven by supply shortages and profiteering.

Inflation happens when demand for goods surpasses the supply of goods. Sometimes, this can be caused by unforeseen factors that suddenly reduce our economy's

ability to supply goods. This happened during the pandemic, when lockdowns caused shortages throughout global supply chains. Similarly, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has affected the availability and price of grain, fertilizers, and fossil fuels.

Inflation can also be spurred by a combination of demand growth and supply challenges. For example, increasing demand and problems in the supply chain have resulted in an ongoing shortage of semiconductor chips. This has had a ripple effect by reducing the number of new vehicles that get made. With fewer new vehicles being produced, the price people are willing to pay for a second-hand vehicle has increased dramatically.

Today's inflation is also being caused by profiteering. Canadians for Tax Fairness studied financial information from publicly-traded companies in Canada, and found that between 2019 and 2021, their average annual sales revenue increased by \$174.5 million – but their costs only increased by \$16.9 million. That means that 90% of the increase in revenue in 2021 was from higher profit margins. Lack of regulation, competition, and low corporate tax rates make profiteering worthwhile for corporations.

Even though current inflation is being caused by supply issues and profiteering, central banks are still attempting to address inflation by reducing demand. In other words, central banks want to solve inflation by reducing the amount of money in people's pockets. Because the central banks can't take money away from people directly, they do it by making it more expensive to borrow money. When interest rates are raised, there are fewer borrowers.



When wages fail to keep up with inflation, workers fall behind. It doesn't have to be this way. Unions can help. To protect workers against inflation, we need to bargain appropriate wage gains and cost-of-living increases.



As a result, private banks create less money. The theory is that when less money is circulated, there is less investment in the economy and unemployment increases. Ideally, this reduces people's purchasing power and slows the rate of price increases.

The problem is that changing prices by changing interest rates is a bit like steering a cruise ship with a canoe paddle. The Bank of Canada expects it to take two years before they fully see the impact of their actions on the economy. In the past, the Bank has increased interest rates higher and faster to prove that they were committed to reducing prices. This is because the only immediate impact of their actions is on people's expectations. As such, central banks have had a tendency to go too far and cause a great deal of hardship for workers.

How do governments respond to inflation?

The current economic consensus assumes that only central banks can address inflation, and governments should stay out of their way. Because of this, governments often respond to inflation and interest rate increases with austerity.

At the same time, government revenues often improve significantly during periods of inflation. Their revenue is a proportion of economic activity. As prices rise, so does government revenue.

The financial situation for the provinces has actually improved dramatically over the past year. When added together, 2021 provincial budget forecasts estimated a total deficit of \$76 billion for the 2021 fiscal year. But the 2022 provincial budgets revealed that actual deficits for 2021 were only \$24 billion.

Deficits were reduced because provincial revenues increased at a higher-than-expected rate. Strong economic growth and higher prices for natural resources contributed to this increase. Provincial incomes were also boosted by inflation, largely through increased sales and corporate tax revenue stemming from higher prices. And governments use smoke and mirrors to make it look like they are spending more than they really are.



Lower government deficits might seem like good news for public services that have been struggling with austerity since the 2008 financial crisis. But this is not necessarily the case. While revenues increased for provincial governments in 2021, and will again in 2022, many are still underinvesting in public services and capping wage increases between 1 and 2%.

What can governments do?

There is a great deal that fiscal policy can accomplish in the face of inflation. In the short term, it is important to understand the causes behind inflation, and try to understand what can and cannot be fixed. For example, governments should be helping to repair supply chains and transportation networks in the short term, and thinking about how to make our industrial policy resilient to future challenges in the long term.

In times of inflation, governments can think about how to provide public alternatives for high-priced items. For example, if gas prices are going to be high in the long term, governments at all levels should think about how to make it easier and cheaper to get around without needing fossil fuels. This is a more targeted and equitable way of reducing demand for a high-priced good than the central bank model of reducing the money supply.

Governments can also regulate prices. Wherever possible, policy makers should think about how to maintain the supply of goods that are price controlled. Rent control is a good example of this: a solid plan for public investment in non-market and co-op housing would help ensure there was sufficient supply of affordable rental housing.

Public services also play a big role in making life more affordable for everyone. Government spending on everything from child care and health care, to public transit and recreation makes life more affordable for people, and makes us all less vulnerable to periods of inflation or economic downturns.

If policy makers are worried about stimulus spending increasing interest rates, they can fund this spending with the revenue increases they inevitably receive during periods of high inflation. In addition, governments across Canada have cut taxes for corporations and the wealthy over the past 30 years. This means that there is significant room to increase these taxes.

Spending that is not funded by borrowing will not be considered inflationary by the central banks, and so won't prompt them to raise interest rates further. Increasing corporate tax rates and taxes on wealth will also counteract the negative impacts of increasing wealth concentration and inequality.



Our role as union leaders

To protect workers against inflation, we need to bargain appropriate wage gains that go above the rate of inflation and appropriate cost-of-living adjustments (COLAs). COLAs are clauses that automatically trigger wage increases when the cost of living rises. They are especially helpful because it is difficult to predict spikes in inflation. When provinces impose wage restraints and austerity, our only solution is coordinated action – up to and including strike action.

Start the conversation about bargaining during inflation in your local today with this video:

cupe.ca/video-bargaining-during-inflation

CUPE provides its members with a tool to measure inflation and to check if their wages are keeping up with changing prices in their region. Find it at:

cupe.ca/cpi-calculator



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