

COUNTERPOINT

SPRING 2025

CUPE'S NATIONAL PUBLICATION



FOCUS

CUPE members in a historic battle for public education support services in Alberta



Economy

Our union's future is ours: Perspectives from CUPE's young workers



Global Justice

Colombia: A long road of solidarity



Reconciliation

Building true partnerships in Saskatchewan: CUPE's Northern and Indigenous Outreach Pilot Project



Profile

WESLEY LESOSKY
CUPE's Airline Division and Air Canada Component president



MOMENTUM IN MOTION

Strong unions powering change

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THIS ELECTION, CHOOSE HOPE AND THE NDP — NOT THE DISASTER CAPITALISM OF PIERRE POILIEVRE

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

With a federal election coming any day now, CUPE members are mobilizing across Canada to make their voices heard on social media, at dinner tables, on the airwaves, and at the ballot box. Justin Trudeau stayed long past his best-before date, and now Canadians will get their say after a decade of Liberal government.

This election is an opportunity like any other election for us to choose the kind of country we want to be. But unlike other elections, the stakes in this one are higher than ever before.

Any opinion poll will tell you people are looking for change and the clock has run out on the Liberals — regardless of whether it's Justin Trudeau or anybody else at the helm. The Liberals have proven time and time again that without the NDP keeping them honest, they will always campaign from the left but govern for the corporate elite.

Meanwhile, Pierre Poilievre and the Conservatives would be a disaster for workers' rights and public services. Pierre is in it for banks, billionaires, and big polluters — not for you. He has been bought and paid for by rich real estate developers, corporate lobbyists, anti-union agitators, big oil, and price-gouging grocery giants. Pierre has never missed an opportunity to exploit people — especially vulnerable people — in order to enrich his already wealthy friends and the well-connected lobbyists who serve them.

For two decades, whether the problem was health care, housing, unemployment, economic downturns, or any other crisis you can name, Pierre's solution has always been to

give rich people more money. That has never worked in the past, and it won't work if — heaven forbid — he ever sets foot in the prime minister's office.

Rather than another life-long politician like Pierre Poilievre who only looks out for his billionaire buddies, we need a government who is looking out for workers and brings change that makes Canada a better, more affordable place to live.

There is only one party offering hope in this election. Jagmeet Singh and the NDP are the only party who have consistently fought for workers and for public services. They are the only party who will strengthen workers' rights and fight for a better future for everybody — especially young people worried about the climate, and whether they'll ever be able to afford a home or find a decent job with a pension.

This election we aren't just encouraging our members to get out and vote for their local NDP candidate. We're encouraging everyone to get even more engaged. That means picking up the phone or knocking on a few doors to talk to your neighbours about what we can all achieve if **we** pull together — and what's at stake if the Conservatives win — in this election.

Head to **cupe.ca/CUPE-Votes** to find out how you can get more information and get involved in this critical election that could make or break Canada as we know it.





CUPE'S 2025 BUDGET IS FORWARD-THINKING AND ACTION-PACKED

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

When Justin Trudeau announced he would be stepping down earlier this year, Canada entered a new political era. The upcoming federal election will present a choice to Canadians.

With the support of unions and community groups, the NDP made historic gains while the Liberals were in power, winning anti-scab legislation, pharmacare and dental care.

We stand to lose these gains if the Conservatives form the next government. From health care to child care to social housing, Pierre Poilievre has attacked **every** federal program that aims to make the lives of workers, children, families and retirees better. He is anti-worker and anti-union.

But a Conservative government is not inevitable. We must act together, before, during and after the election. We must join with others to build a powerful coalition of resistance and refuse to cede any ground.

CUPE is up for this challenge. We bring 750,000 members, incredible diversity, community ties and determination to win progressive change. Our membership is growing, and we are mightier than we have been at any time in our history.

CUPE's revenue comes almost entirely from members' dues, and we are committed to putting every penny of those dues to work for members. CUPE's 2025 budget is all about making our union more inclusive, more effective, and more powerful.

This year, we expect a significant increase in revenue, and we are directing that new money to expand existing initiatives and build new programs, including adding a record number of new CUPE staff.

We want to draw down CUPE's Defence Fund surplus and use the money for initiatives that defend the interests of our members and ensure that locals have access to more support and services.

We are increasing support for local campaigns to give locals the tools they need to defend all we have won for working people over 60 years of struggle.

We are directing funding to consolidate CUPE's bargaining power, to strengthen our existing bargaining councils, and establish new ones.

Funding is also earmarked for a new intensive leadership program for members, and to support and expand our initiatives to create a safer union for all members, leaders and staff.

CUPE's budget is designed not just to protect our members' interests, but also to advance them. It's going to be an uphill battle given the political times we live in, and funding is being directed to political action, including adding staff in every region across the country, to amplify our impact in upcoming elections.

We are going to be spending a lot of money. And I am proud to stand behind this budget, because I believe that members' dues should be used for members' benefit, not stashed in a bank collecting interest.

We're in for a tough year, but we will get through it. We'll have each other's backs, we'll refuse to be paralysed by fear or anger or despair, and we'll keep moving forward.





CUPE VOTES FOR A FAIRER CANADA

CANADA IS AT A CROSSROADS.

On one hand, we face skyrocketing cost-of-living, a housing crisis, and growing threats to public services and the environment. On the other, we have right-wing leaders like Pierre Poilievre, who promise to support workers but always side with banks, billionaires, and big polluters when push comes to shove.

There is a better path forward — one guided by progressive leadership that puts workers, families, and communities first.

There is no question that Canada needs new leadership, and after a decade in power, the Liberals are a spent force. Time and again, they have promised transformative change, only to fall short. While they campaign from the left, once elected, they often make compromises or slow progress on critical issues like universal pharmacare, dental care, and climate action, even as the NDP pushes them to follow through. Canadians need a government that will deliver for everyday people, not for corporate elites.





We need a government that will move us forward with purpose, fairness, and a commitment to justice for all. The time has come for a shift that truly prioritizes the well-being of all Canadians.

It's easy to claim to be fighting for the little guy, but actions speak louder than slogans. Pierre Poilievre and the Conservatives do represent change – for the worse. They talk a big game about supporting working people, but their record of slashing public services, weakening environmental protections, and undermining workers' rights tells a different story.

We don't need another life-long politician like Pierre Poilievre serving the wealthy. As the political face of corporate greed, the Conservatives' policies are the cause of — not the solution to — many of the problems we face today. They benefit big business at the expense of working families, who must shoulder higher out-of-pocket costs for essentials and endure lower wages with fewer workplace protections. Their cuts to public services and the social safety net would be catastrophic, undoing years of progress.

Canada needs new progressive leadership. As our country grapples with a housing crisis, an ever-rising cost of living, and escalating climate challenges, we can't rely on half measures or corporate-friendly policies. We need a government with the courage to deliver real solutions, effective action on housing, better pay, and stronger public services. Canada needs bold, progressive leadership that will protect our rights and stand up to powerful interests and lobbies.

That leadership matters not just in principle but in practice: governments are the employers of thousands of CUPE members, shaping their working conditions, the public services they deliver, and the very laws and regulations that govern employment and labour relations.



That is why CUPE is proud to support Jagmeet Singh and the New Democratic Party. They have consistently championed workers' rights, fought for robust public services, and pushed for meaningful, long-term answers to the cost-of-living crisis.

From forcing the Liberal government to adopt anti-scab legislation, to defending programs we all rely on — like national pharmacare, dental care, and child care — the NDP has shown it is willing to stand shoulder to shoulder with unions and everyday Canadians. Together, we can build on these vital achievements and create a better future.

Pierre Poilievre is hoping we won't remember how damaging Harper-style attacks on public services can be – but we won't let that happen again. The best path forward is to elect more New Democrats to the House of Commons — leaders who understand what it's like to struggle with rent, face sky-high grocery bills, or worry about privatized essential services. By supporting local NDP candidates, we can fight for workers' rights and stronger social programs and shift the balance of power in Ottawa to build a fairer Canada, the Canada we all deserve.

This election, we encourage all CUPE members to get involved and make their voices heard. Visit cupe.ca/CUPE-Votes to find out how you can get involved.



CUPE MEMBERS IN A HISTORIC BATTLE FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION SUPPORT SERVICES IN ALBERTA

SUPPORT EDUCATION WORKERS TODAY





Parents and advocacy groups have been shouting from the rooftops for years about the damage caused by underfunding and undervaluing support services in public education. Access to the resources needed to facilitate learning in Alberta's K-12 public education system is nearly impossible for many children and families.

Extensive burnout, low pay, and loss of hours have been exacerbating staff shortfalls in education support for years, with the consequences becoming overwhelming amidst a rising cost of living. "On any given day, hundreds of critical positions are left vacant in our schools," said Mandy Lamoureux, president of CUPE 3550.

CUPE represents 41 education support locals in Alberta, including educational assistants, library technicians, custodians, administrative and therapy assistants, interpreters, and several other job classifications. After going without a raise for over a decade, these support staff have been locked into a continued loss of real wages by the United Conservative Party (UCP) government's mandated caps at the bargaining table.

The province requires all school divisions in bargaining to adhere to mandates set by the Provincial Bargaining and Compensation Office (PBCO) – an arm of the provincial government – with a PBCO representative physically sitting at most bargaining tables and calling the shots. Despite clear evidence to the contrary, UCP cabinet ministers consistently claim they are not involved in bargaining between school divisions and CUPE. This prompted an open letter from CUPE Alberta President Rory Gill to the Alberta government, denouncing actions and comments that undermine the spirit of the legal bargaining process and demanding it be honest about its role – either admitting it is actively working against CUPE members or allowing them to negotiate in good faith.

In addition to blatantly denying its role in setting wage rates, the UCP also denies its failure to keep up with student enrollment growth, allowing education funding to lag further behind. "The UCP government is moving public dollars into private schools at an alarming rate, and their intentional neglect of our public education system will have severe and long-lasting impacts on students, families, and ultimately our communities," said Gill.

While UCP Premier Danielle Smith promised to create 3,000 additional education support positions in Alberta during the province's 2023 election, none of these positions will materialize if school divisions can only offer poverty-level incomes to those managing complex student needs in exploding class sizes. Not only are wages failing to keep up with staggering inflation, but after more than a decade without raises, the ongoing wage suppression has made it extremely difficult to attract and retain qualified staff. "These are skilled jobs," said CUPE 4625 President Kelly Salisbury. "We give everything we've got to our students and, at the end of the day, if we can't meet the needs of our own families, we question how we can possibly keep going on like this."

The constitutionally protected right to strike is the last line of defense CUPE education workers have to stop the erosion of their wages and the breakdown of public education in Alberta. "This fight truly is about the sustainability of quality public education. The difference we make every single day cannot be overstated. It's devastating to see students go without their needs met, and we feel torn between staying to be there for our students and being able to support ourselves financially," said Michelle Bilodeau, a CUPE 3550 member.

On September 17, 2024, CUPE 2559 and CUPE 2545, the two education locals in Fort McMurray, were set to strike when the province intervened by appointing a Disputes Inquiry Board (DIB), forcing the locals into a repeat round of mediation. On October 24, 2024, the province applied the same delay tactic to CUPE 3550, the union's largest education local in Edmonton. CUPE members held a political protest at the Legislature that day, joined by thousands of union allies, parents, and public supporters in a massive and inspiring show of solidarity. CUPE 4625 in Sturgeon County, just outside Edmonton, saw the writing on the wall and chose to delay their strike notice to wait for the others to complete the DIB process.

Almost all of CUPE's remaining 36 education sector locals in Alberta have been coordinating as quickly as possible to align with the four locals on strike. Strong, supermajority strike mandates, like the ones CUPE Alberta members have given their bargaining committees, are not typical in this province, highlighting the importance of this fight.

“We are in a moment in history here,” said Lynn Fleet, president of CUPE 2545 in Fort McMurray. “In all the years I’ve been with this local, I couldn’t have imagined being out day after day in -30-degree weather, mounting this level of pressure, fighting so hard to get just a little bit of justice for our members, and the students and families who count on us every day. It’s been a wake up call for our community about the kinds of MLAs we elected here, who have so easily turned their backs on working people.”

What began as individual locals bargaining with school divisions has evolved to CUPE’s entire education sector in Alberta taking a stand against the provincial government’s wage mandates and erosion of public education services. The outpouring of solidarity for education support workers from across the province and the country has been unbelievable. CUPE locals far and wide, union allies, parents, disability advocates, local organizations, and small businesses have been showing that this fight goes beyond bargaining – it is about the integrity and value of our public education system and those who make it work. This is one of the biggest battles CUPE has taken on in Alberta in recent history.

Find out how to support Alberta’s education workers at **SupportEducationWorkers.ca**

Mark Hancock, Rory Gill, and Mandy Lamoureux with thousands of CUPE members marching to the Legislature where they will be joined by thousands of other union members, parents, and public supporters in a political protest on October 24, 2024, which would have been CUPE 3550’s first day on strike before the province intervened with a DIB.



Left to right: Presidents Mandy Lamoureux (CUPE 3550), Kelly Salisbury (CUPE 4625), Danielle Danis (CUPE 2559), and Lynn Fleet (CUPE 2545)

OUR UNION'S FUTURE IS OURS: PERSPECTIVES FROM CUPE'S YOUNG WORKERS

In a time of unprecedented uncertainty – where workers' rights are under threat from conservative politicians and corporate interests – the hard-won gains of the past century are at risk. A new generation of workers is stepping into this struggle, navigating harsh economic realities and social pressures while juggling their personal and professional lives.

Determined to tackle these challenges, five young CUPE members share their perspectives on why young workers across the country should get involved and how union activism can be an empowering force. Their insights come as CUPE hosts its first-ever National Young Workers Conference, bringing together future leaders and emerging activists to mobilize, organize, share ideas, and build on their skills and talents. The conference features workshops and discussions focused on connecting new and veteran activists, strengthening union skills to build stronger, more dynamic and resilient locals, and amplifying young workers' voices.

Meet the young workers

**TREVOR CARSON (30)**

IS A CARE ATTENDANT IN A SMALL-TOWN LONG-TERM CARE FACILITY IN NEWFOUNDLAND. HE FIRST GOT INVOLVED WITH CUPE 4935 AT AGE 25.

**MIKAYLA GALLANT (29)**

WORKS AS A COOK IN A HEALTH CARE FACILITY IN PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND. SHE IS THE YOUNG WORKERS' REPRESENTATIVE WITH CUPE 805.

**MAXIME LEROUX (28)**

IS A BUS OPERATOR IN SHERBROOKE, QUEBEC. HE TOOK AN ACTIVE ROLE IN CUPE 3434'S FIGHT AGAINST MUNICIPAL TRANSIT PRIVATIZATION EFFORTS.

**ALYSSA MCGREE (27)**

IS AN EDUCATION SUPPORT WORKER WITH CUPE 2486 IN ONTARIO. SHE GREW UP IN A UNION HOUSEHOLD, INTRODUCED TO UNION ACTIVISM BY HER PARENTS AT AN EARLY AGE.

**BRITTANY AUBE (31)**

WORKS IN CHILD CARE IN MANITOBA. SHE IS THE PRESIDENT OF CUPE 3060 AND ADVOCATES FOR GREATER RECOGNITION OF CHILD CARE WORKERS.

WHY SHOULD YOUNG WORKERS GET INVOLVED WITH THE UNION?

Mikayla:

"As young people, we need to learn how to navigate union procedures and build the foundational union skills that will allow us to take on leadership roles later."

Maxime:

"It's about our future. We want to help shape it and leave a strong legacy. What's important is that we're always stronger when we stand together."

Alyssa:

"When our local was ramping up to go on strike in 2021, I got involved because I was curious about the work they were doing. That curiosity turned into action when I realized how much the human resources program I took in school overlapped with union activism. It's crucial for young workers to know their rights – like the right to refuse unsafe work – and to be familiar with their collective agreements. By getting involved early, we can learn from experienced activists and help keep the labour movement strong as more people retire."

Trevor:

"Workers' rights are only possible because we have a union. It's so important to start getting involved as early as we can."

Brittany:

"Young workers are the future of our workplaces and our union. Our issues today are drastically different from those the older generations once faced. By getting involved, we can feel empowered to make real change. We're often underrepresented in union roles, events and committees, so we must assert our voices and gain a better understanding of what the union is."

WHAT CHALLENGES ARE YOUNG WORKERS FACING?

Alyssa:

"There is so much uncertainty for our future with the rising costs of housing, food, and other basics. Violence in the workplace is common, and casual, low-wage work without benefits makes it worse. Conservative governments, like Doug Ford's, have cut indexing for pensions and threatened more cuts. Those policies hurt young workers most because we're just starting out."

Trevor:

"We're facing both external and internal challenges. Understaffing pushes many young workers away and hurts retention. The cost of living is too high. Working parents can't find affordable child care. In Newfoundland, there's also a feeling of isolation on the west side of the island – we need more accessibility for rural union members to get engaged."

Brittany:

"In child care, many young workers juggle multiple jobs just to make ends meet. For those with children, living paycheck to paycheck is especially hard because there is no way to get ahead. It leads to social pressure and a sense of failure compared to previous generations. We experience financial distress and severe mental health challenges. I'm almost 32 and have worked three jobs (one full-time, two part-time) consistently for 10 years. I have gone through bankruptcy, I live with my mom, and I can't fathom how I'd afford having a family. When my mom was 32, she owned a house and had two kids already. There has been a huge shift, the economy just doesn't set us up to reach the same milestones."

Mikayla:

"P.E.I.'s older population is retiring in large numbers since the pandemic, leaving workplaces understaffed and undertrained. Worse, young workers are offered financial incentives to stay casual, but then lose



HOW CAN OUR UNION HELP YOUNG WORKERS BECOME ACTIVISTS?

pensions, vacations, and health benefits. Here, too, the cost of living is so outrageous that many people can't afford to move out of their parents' home and desperately need that extra income. Plus, the vast majority of CUPE members on P.E.I. don't have the right to strike, so it's hard to deal with a government that refuses to bargain. It's tough to convince front-line workers in many of our essential services to get involved if they feel they have no power – especially with constant privatization looming."

Maxime:

"Privatization is a huge issue. In Sherbrooke, half of public transport is privatized, with lower salaries, pensions, and benefits. The private sector puts pressure on our good union jobs and public service funding. The city claims fair wages make public transit too expensive, then cuts the transportation budget, pushing more cars onto the road instead of protecting the environment. Young workers really care about our planet. How can we protect it if governments won't help us?"

Trevor:

"It can be tricky to engage young workers. Having CUPE create spaces specifically for us helps us feel included. We need more workshops dedicated to young workers and basic union education at the local level. We also have to close the gap between newer and veteran activists so they can learn from each other."

Maxime:

"It's important for us to see the union's concrete actions on the ground. Funding strikes and showing young workers how the union supports us builds engagement. I'm militant because I see firsthand how employers and governments try to keep us down, and how we've been fighting back. Visibility and transparency really matter."

Mikayla:


"Having a young workers' representative is a great first step for locals, but many of us have precarious jobs and irregular schedules, so we often don't get paid for union work. Our union should find ways to nurture young workers – providing financial support and flexibility so we can actually participate. Clear communication and patience will also help new activists feel welcome."

Alyssa:

"Providing safe, inclusive spaces for young workers to learn is essential, and so is creating opportunities for us to get more involved. If we're showing interest, give us a task. At my local, we're trying to create a young workers' committee so we can support each other. Hosting social events geared to younger members can also spark interest."

Brittany:

"We must reach out to, and find common interests with, all CUPE members, especially younger ones who feel restricted or excluded. Economic realities have changed – many of us spend years in school, switch careers to find the right fit, or take time to get established in our workplaces – before we feel ready to engage with our union. That's why we need to recognize that "young worker" issues can easily extend beyond the "30 and under" demographic. Updating our constitution and structure could also ensure we have a say."



**IF YOU COULD GIVE THE
NEXT GENERATION OF
YOUNG WORKERS ONE
PIECE OF ADVICE, WHAT
WOULD IT BE?**

Brittany:

"Pay attention to what stirs strong emotions, like anger, sadness, or empathy. Those are signs of what you're truly passionate about, so turn them into positive action. Step outside your comfort zone and be a voice for those who can't speak up. You'll change your mind a million times, so don't worry about inexperience – the only way to gain experience is through new ideas, dreams, and goals."

Mikayla:

"When we look around, it can feel like things are getting worse. It's hard to stay hopeful and take action, but it isn't hopeless. Getting involved can actually be a lot of fun. Being loud and making good trouble is empowering."

Trevor:


"Go to your general meetings. In twenty minutes, you'll see there's so much you can learn. And read your collective agreement!"

Maxime:

"Don't be scared to dive in. Do what you think is best. No one is going to fight for your rights if you don't fight for them yourself."

Alyssa:

"I found my voice by getting involved in my union. I used to be shy, but stepping up broke me out of my shell. Even if it's scary, there are plenty of educational opportunities and support to help you grow and empower you to take up the space you deserve."



RAISING THE FLOOR FOR CHILD CARE WORKERS



Prologue: A historic contract

In late July, hours after a midnight strike deadline had passed – but with both sides still at the bargaining table – child care workers with CUPE 2484 reached a momentous deal with Ideal Child Services Group.

They mobilized parents, info-picketed outside each of the five centres with an ice cream truck and flyers, delivered a supermajority petition to their employer's head office, and won nearly everything they had been fighting for, including an 11.25% wage increase over their three-year contract.

It was a game changer of a deal – and a massive validation of two years' worth of effort. It was also just the first phase in CUPE 2484's plan to change the way child care workers organize, fight, and win.



What is the \$10-a-day plan?

In 2021, after decades of advocacy work, the federal government established a new national child care program. Similar to how the Canada Health Act revolutionized the Canadian health care system, the Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Plan is historic as it aims to ensure access to affordable, high-quality child care across the country.

What does it include?

Through agreements, the federal government funds provinces and territories to:

- 1) reduce the cost of child care for parents,
- 2) create new non-profit and public child care spaces,
- 3) improve working conditions in the sector, and
- 4) ensure high-quality, inclusive and culturally appropriate programming.

Once treated primarily as a business, early learning and child care is now recognized as a core part of children's education that is worth funding and managing publicly.

By improving access and affordability, more parents can work, study, or volunteer. Strengthening working conditions in a sector where 96% of workers are women, many of whom are racialized, also advances social equity. And by ensuring quality and inclusion, child care allows children to flourish in ways that benefit them throughout their lives. Although the Plan and its implementation are still evolving, all provinces and territories have made significant progress, making child care more affordable for nearly one million families.

Unionization reinforces these gains by sustaining workers' power and by keeping pressure on governments to fulfill and expand the Plan's goals, secure improvements in collective agreements, and elevate a historically undervalued sector. Ultimately, building solidarity benefits workers, parents, children, and society at large.



Jess Tomas at a rally at Queen's Park with other child care representatives from CUPE Ontario and Christina Gilligan, sector coordinator.



Chapter One: The opportunity

In 2022, everything was changing in child care. COVID-19 had ravaged the sector. While some child care centres closed, others were called on to provide emergency care. Child care deserts spread throughout Saskatchewan, uncertainty chased workers from jobs across Ontario, and child care spaces dried up in British Columbia. The pandemic fundamentally altered the nature of child care work while, at the same time, reinforcing for policy makers the essential role it plays in a thriving economy and a gender-equal society.

Then the federal government announced the Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Plan, promising accessible and affordable care through new federal funding to provinces and territories.

"We had a sixth sense, a sort of premonition about where things were

going. We'd already experienced big changes in our work in terms of a new focus on sanitizing, bubbling, keeping family cohorts together. Our jobs looked nothing like they did before the pandemic," explains Jess Tomas, an early childhood educator and president of CUPE 2484. "We saw this as a reset. The new federal plan was our opportunity. It was aimed entirely at parents but we were going to take advantage of the moment."

Chapter Two: Coordinated bargaining

CUPE 2484 is one of the largest child care composite locals, representing more than 600 early childhood educators, assistants, cooks, cleaners, and others across the GTA. The local knew they had to make serious improvements in terms of wages, benefits, and working conditions. It was perfectly positioned

to capitalize on the moment.

"We knew if we didn't do something bold, something different, we'd continue to be on the defensive. Our work had changed, so we decided to demand that our compensation change too," Tomas says.

Not only did CUPE 2484 have roughly 20 bargaining units entering negotiations in 2022, it is also home to workers at the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care (OCBCC), a leading advocacy group in the child care space.

The OCBCC, together with CUPE 2484's leadership, designed *Raising the Floor*, a coordinated bargaining campaign built around five pillars of decent work beyond a drastic improvement in wages: paid programming time, paid sick days, paid professional development time, Workplace Safety and Insurance Board coverage, and access to communities of practice.

CUPE 2484 brought all the units



entering bargaining together to present the proposals and include them in a *Unity Letter*. Signed by more than 86% of members, the letter stated their commitment to decent work for all and affirmed support for the coordinated bargaining pillars. It also served as a touchstone members returned to whenever bargaining got challenging.

Chapter Three: Building confidence

The first and most urgent challenge in the campaign wasn't convincing the employers or advocating to the government. It was changing the way child care workers saw themselves and their value.

"Even a few years ago, we'd never have asked for serious change. We didn't know we could. That's part of the nature of care work generally. We feel like a part of these family units. There's a tremendous amount of closeness, of trust, and child care workers never want to do anything that damages that relationship," says Tomas.

That is why so many early childhood educators spend their savings to buy supplies for their classrooms, walk home instead of paying for transit so they can put their own dollars toward creating learning opportunities for the children in their care.

The depth of workers' commitment has been weaponized by employers and governments, sapping the sector of a sense of organizing power. But building members' confidence was the key to help them advocate for themselves.

"Those early meetings were part organizing strategy, part support group for child care workers to gain a sense

of community and trust," Tomas recalls. "And those conversations carried us through the entire campaign. They literally changed the way many thought about themselves, helping them understand that they deserve better."

Chapter Four: Ideal

Ideal Child Services Group was among the last of that initial cohort to start bargaining. While other employers saw the value in *Raising the Floor* – many proposals were aimed at improving the quality of service and stabilizing a sector in turmoil – management at Ideal was intransigent from the start.

Compounding the difficulty of this bargaining is the logistical challenge of Ideal – it's five centres are spread across the Greater Toronto Area, each with different, opaque management structures – and the fact that a large number of Ideal's staff are newcomers to Canada whose immigration status is tied to their employment.

"Management tried to atomize workers, to divide them from each other, to leave them feeling helpless," Tomas says.

But CUPE 2484 returned to the *Unity Letter* and their solidarity actions, with members from other centres sharing supportive photos of themselves. "We wanted workers to feel their power and the community behind them. And I could see their transformation, from frustration to hope and eventually confidence."

That confidence led to a 100% strike vote, packed in-person meetings to train for a strike, conversations with parents to win them over – and eventually a ratified contract that Ideal workers could be proud of.

Chapter Five: Member-led

The new contract at Ideal energized CUPE 2484 and gave them the confidence to move to stage two.

When they had first introduced coordinated bargaining, the proposals were drawn up largely by the local executive and activists. Now, in an important first – only possible because of the confidence they helped instill – members are creating their own proposals.

In October and November, dozens gathered in meetings to share their priorities and to draft proposals for the 12 units entering bargaining in 2025. This was a new experience in member-led bargaining. And it was proof to Tomas that the campaign had fundamentally changed the way members understand their own power.

One example of the many issues members are mobilizing around is the need for reliable Wi-Fi in child care centres – a priority voiced by one CUPE member. At first glance, it might seem like an insignificant demand compared to wages or WSIB coverage. But it reflects the broad scope of challenges child care workers face.

They are expected to provide families with daily updates and track activities, often relying on their personal devices, as many have no reliable internet access on site. So, all bargaining units are now determined to make Wi-Fi a priority at the bargaining table, alongside other improvements that recognize the evolving nature of their work.



"I was so proud of that worker for explaining themselves and making their needs clear. That would not have happened even two years ago," Tomas insists. "Our greatest enemy is thinking that we are alone as workers. The more we share, the more power we build."

Chapter Six: Parallels in the Atlantic

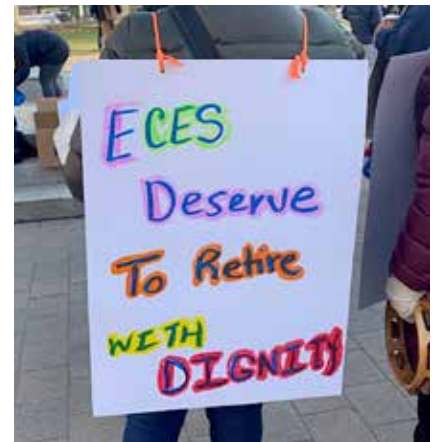
This victory in Ontario echoed a similar triumph in Nova Scotia. There, Margot Nickerson, president of CUPE 4745, also helped secure historic gains after years of advocacy.

Since the pandemic, early childhood educators in Nova Scotia had been exhausted by tough working conditions and low pay. Many left the profession entirely, while those who stayed juggled multiple jobs to make ends meet. Just as CUPE 2484 leveraged the federal government's Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Plan, CUPE 4745 knew that the timing was right to push for improved compensation.



What started with informal social media conversations rose to a sector-wide movement. Nickerson remembers with pride how, on a single workday in September, over 200 people turned out to demand better working conditions for child care workers. "I think everybody could identify with the asks. Our messaging was not threatening but it was strong. We were clear on our demands," she says.

Through rallies and information sessions, CUPE 4745 built broad support among workers and parents alike. They called for a provincial salary scale, pensions, and benefits.



"What I am proudest of is that we pushed for a defined benefit pension plan," Nickerson recalls, describing how members attended local information sessions to learn about different types of pensions.

Faced with mounting pressure, the provincial government conceded. Child care workers won a wage grid, extended health benefits, and a defined benefit pension plan. According to Nickerson, the key to their success lay in including all workers in the campaign — unionized or not — so the entire sector could stand together, build power and force significant change.



Epilogue

Child care workers do far more than look after children. They help them develop vital social and cognitive skills, while enabling parents to be active participants in Canadian communities. Yet the working conditions in the child care sector often fail to reflect the depth of expertise and the true value of this work.

The victories achieved by CUPE 2484 in Ontario and CUPE 4745 in Nova Scotia signal a wider, national push for better compensation, safer working environments, and greater respect for child care work. CUPE members have proved once again that when workers unite, they can compel meaningful, sector-wide change. By tapping into new federal funding streams, publicly demonstrating the value of early childhood education, and pushing for decent work for all, they have set a powerful precedent for other child care workers across the country.

Now is the time to shine a light on early learning and child care and address the workforce crisis at its core. Explore CUPE's comic strips to see the realities of child care work, and join the growing call for change.

Add your voice to CUPE's campaign to call on the federal government to fund a national workforce strategy, working with provinces and territories to ensure fair wages, extended benefits, a pension plan, professional development opportunities, and paid preparation time.

With every signature, early learning and child care workers from coast to coast to coast gain more power to secure the respect, stability, and support they deserve.

cupe.ca/lets-shine-light-early-learning-child-care



Jess Tomas delivering the Unity Letter to Ideal Child Services Group, flanked by the chairs of CUPE Ontario's SSWCC and municipal committee.



STAYING AHEAD OF THE RISK WITH CUPE'S GUIDE TO WORKPLACE INFECTION CONTROL

CUPE IS PROUD TO INTRODUCE OUR
HEALTH AND SAFETY GUIDELINES:
CONTROLLING INFECTIOUS AGENTS IN
THE WORKPLACE, A NEW HEALTH AND
SAFETY RESOURCE FOR MEMBERS
AND LOCALS.





This guide outlines the risks that infectious agents pose in CUPE workplaces, how infectious agents are transmitted, and more importantly, how risks can be mitigated. It provides workers with information on how to identify and manage these hazards effectively.

Although many of the public health regulations put in place during the COVID-19 pandemic have been removed or relaxed, infectious diseases continue to pose health and safety concerns in CUPE workplaces. Some of our members are exposed to infectious diseases by working closely with infected patients, while others encounter hazards in environments contaminated with pathogens, including outdoor settings.

Every jurisdiction has different requirements for infection prevention control programs and related policies. Regardless of local laws, joint health and safety committees and health and safety representatives should develop strategies to help employers establish workplace programs and policies. These initiatives are essential for both preventing exposure to infectious agents and managing disease in the workplace.

Back in 2002-2003, the SARS outbreak revealed significant gaps in Canada's infectious disease preparedness and public health systems, leading to a public inquiry in Ontario chaired by Justice Archie Campbell. Justice Campbell's investigation highlighted the lack of proactive measures to protect health care workers during the outbreak.

Justice Campbell completed his final report containing his findings and recommendations in December 2006. He strongly advocated for the precautionary principle, emphasizing that "reasonable steps to reduce risk should not await scientific certainty." This means we should err on the side of caution and take preventive measures to safeguard workers, even if we don't yet have proof that something is definitely harmful.

CUPE has long endorsed the precautionary principle as an important tenet of workplace health and safety.

Almost 15 years later, the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that lessons from past infectious disease outbreaks such as SARS haven't been learned. Adequate protective measures, aligned with the precautionary principle, were not sufficiently implemented, exposing workers to potential harm.

For example, according to the Canadian Institute for Health Information, over 150,000 health care workers were exposed to and infected by COVID-19 during the pandemic. Most of these

cases were preventable with rigorous and proactive infection control procedures based on the precautionary principle.

CUPE's guidelines for controlling infectious agents in the workplace emphasize the need to use the precautionary principle and provide practical tips to help protect workers from infectious diseases. No single approach can solve the problem of infectious agents in the workplace. Health and safety committees and health and safety representatives should review the recommendations in this document and decide which are appropriate for their particular situation.

By following these guidelines, we can help ensure that CUPE members are as well prepared and as safe as possible.

Find the *Health and Safety Guidelines: Controlling Infectious Agents in the Workplace* at cupe.ca as well as CUPE's wide range of health and safety resources on the topics covered in this guide.



FROM HOSTILITY TO UNITY: FILIPINO WORKERS SETTLE IN RURAL N.B.



In the small, tight-knit town of Campbellton, in northern New Brunswick, where everyone knows each other's name, change can be unsettling. Like many rural areas, Campbellton has experienced out-migration and population decline. But in the fall of 2023, a significant change swept through the town, stirring both suspicion and hope among the locals.

A group of Filipino workers had been recruited into Campbellton to fill positions at the local nursing home. Their arrival sparked both curiosity and apprehension among the nursing home staff, represented by CUPE 2354.

“It was a big transition when I came to Campbellton,” says Rhea Marie Gayares, a Resident Attendant, who landed in the town without knowing a single person while needing to sort out some basic necessities before starting her new job. “I needed to go to the bank. I needed to get my SIN. So, with all my courage I just walked up to some Filipinos that I met in the hallway of my building and asked them where I needed to go.”

The employer provided workers with accommodations and oversaw their move to Canada. The arrangements highlighted the broader vulnerabilities often experienced by temporary foreign workers across the country. Housing was cramped, but affordable rental options in Campbellton were scarce. Many workers lived in a precarious financial situation, and some were even forced to seek help from food banks.

On top of these challenges, the employer attempted to create a divide in the workplace. Months before the new workers arrived, the employer stoked fears among the existing staff, warning that their jobs were at risk and could be replaced by foreign workers. For Nancy Adams, president of CUPE 2354 and a Licensed Practical Nurse with over 21 years of experience, it was no longer business as usual. This wasn't just another change – it was a test of leadership – as she was at the centre of the challenge to maintain unity in the local. Adams recognized that how the union



responded would determine whether the members would strengthen solidarity and trust with each other or fall victim to division.

So, she made a pivotal decision: she called for help from Marie-Gabrielle Gagnon, CUPE's human rights representative, and June Savoie, CUPE 2354's servicing representative. Together, they strategized with local members, not just to prepare for the arrival of the new workers and their immediate needs, but to address concerns. Adams emphasized the need to focus on shared humanity and common goals, making it clear that this was an issue worth fighting for.

Adams personally greeted the Filipino workers with heartfelt handwritten letters, and the local prepared welcome kits for everyone that included, among other things, essential

information and the union's collective agreement. Union members rallied to help, bringing food, groceries, diapers, uniforms, and clothing. Private union meetings provided a safe space where the new workers could voice their struggles. The local's efforts went beyond welcoming new members into the union — it was about standing up for their well-being, like other CUPE locals had done in similar situations.

The union's leadership made it clear that the Filipino workers were not competitors, but allies striving for better lives in Canada. "We were encouraged to join union meetings," recalls Mary Annabelle Elumba, a Personal Support Worker

who moved to Campbellton along with three other workers. "They said they would help us if my colleagues and I have any problems."

For instance, CUPE 2354 made it a priority to ensure that all workers were treated equally, regardless of their employment status or background. Once the new staff had started and as many full-time positions were becoming available, due to high turnover in the sector, the employer attempted to block Filipino workers from applying to those jobs. "Our union really helped us a lot," Gayares recounts. "When there were a lot of vacancies for full-time positions, it was our union president that stood up to make sure we could apply for them." By fighting for the right of temporary workers to be treated the same as others and to post into available permanent positions, Adams and her team prevented the employer from filling these vacancies with a continuous stream of new temporary workers, perpetuating precarity and inequalities.

As the months passed, more Filipino workers began attending union meetings. CUPE 2354 made sure these meetings were held in neutral, comfortable locations to foster inclusivity. By April 2024, the participation of the new workers had increased significantly, and the union meetings became a space for building solidarity.

Adams and her executive would often stay behind after official proceedings to address any lingering concerns with the new workers and to promote trust and safety. Over the next months, their strategy paid off as more and more workers were engaging in union activities and recognizing the value of collective strength.

The union's inclusive approach not only built solidarity between local and foreign workers but also brought new energy into the local. This approach is key to organizing in any local union context. It results in a much stronger union, where all members are engaged and the employer is unable to pit one group against another. Today, with nearly half of the nursing home's workforce composed of Filipino workers, CUPE 2354 is stronger and more unified than ever.

"Our members understood that these workers, like so many before them across the country, had come seeking better opportunities for themselves and their families," Adams explains. She reflects on this journey as one of growth for the union as a whole. There is now a growing recognition of the need for increased representation on the local executive to reflect members' diversity.

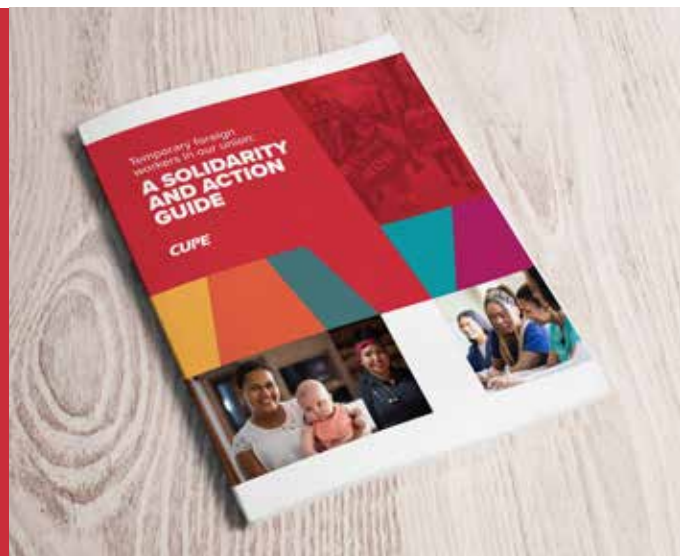




While challenges remain, Adams and her team are committed to fighting for the rights and well-being of all their members. Looking ahead, CUPE 2354 plans to continue building on the relationships formed and create close ties with all future workers who join the union, ensuring they receive the same support and opportunities as everyone else.

For workers like Rhea Marie Gayares and Mary Annabelle Elumba, the support they have experienced from their union has made them feel part of the team at work and New Brunswickers. Gayares has already successfully applied to a full-time position thanks to the advocacy of CUPE 2354 and for Elumba, “everyone is so nice,” she says of the people in New Brunswick, “I think I will stay and maybe pursue my nursing career in Canada.”

CUPE's *Temporary Foreign Workers in Our Union: A Solidarity and Action Guide* serves as a key resource for CUPE bargaining teams and local executives, helping them support members who are temporary foreign workers. It provides insights into the unique legal and workplace issues these workers face and reinforces CUPE's commitment to creating inclusive and supportive workplaces for everyone.





Bargaining Forward: The story of a strike that sparked a global movement

In 2021, 22,000 CUPE New Brunswick public service workers launched a strike that reverberated across the country. Workers from multiple sectors united to demand fair wages after years of crushing provincial austerity. Their determination led to significant gains, including 15-17% wage increases and full pay for casual workers.

Their story is captured in the bilingual documentary *Bargaining Forward*, which was screened at the Canadian Labour International Film Festival and the Workers Unite! Film Festival in New York City.

Featuring interviews with CUPE members and staff, the film explores how New Brunswick's coordinated bargaining strategy resulted in victory and ignited major labour actions across Canada.

The New York screening in October 2024 brought CUPE New Brunswick members together with labour activists from around the world. During a post-screening discussion, the audience burst into applause as CUPE participants announced the ouster of New Brunswick's anti-worker conservative government during the provincial election, and shared updates on ongoing coordinated bargaining efforts.

In May 2025, *Bargaining Forward* will also be featured at the 20th International Labour Film Festival in Turkey, a key event in the fight for human rights.

The far-reaching impact of the New Brunswick strike highlights how the courage of one group of workers can empower others. These screenings will continue to amplify CUPE members' story for broader audiences and will harness the power of our solidarity to strengthen global movements for workers' rights.

Watch the documentary: cupe.ca/bargaining-forward
Read the book: cupe.ca/read-book-bargaining-forward



BUILDING TRUE PARTNERSHIPS IN SASKATCHEWAN: CUPE'S NORTHERN AND INDIGENOUS OUTREACH PILOT PROJECT



Saskatchewan's north is a place of sweeping beauty and vibrant culture, distinguished by small tight-knit communities that possess rich traditions, languages, and ways of life. Many people there are Michif, Cree or Dene speakers, and follow traditions rooted in sharing, giving, fishing, hunting, and gathering. Despite this rich heritage, the northern region has experienced sustained underinvestment and high poverty rates.

CUPE has embarked on a new and targeted initiative — the Northern and Indigenous Outreach Pilot Project — to address these challenges in a way that respects local ways of life, fosters mutual trust, and elevates the voices of people in northern Saskatchewan.

The pilot project arises from the recognition that the northern communities represent the fastest-growing demographic in the province. But in these largely Indigenous communities, life and culture have evolved away from the province's urban centres. In 2022, the University of Saskatchewan released the results of a research project conducted with the cooperation of seven northern communities. The report found northerners want more resources in the north, they want their children to be able to be educated in their home communities, find good-paying jobs, and spend their lives there.

CUPE is the community union. Rather than replicating existing urban-based union models, we want to respond effectively to northern communities' unique realities and empower them to advocate for better resources, a better quality of life, and better jobs. Our focus is to build meaningful relationships, engage current Indigenous CUPE members, and become a more inclusive

and trusted partner where geographic remoteness, cultural barriers, and historical distrust of colonial institutions persist.

Genuine gestures

Too often, organizations limit their outreach efforts to days of recognition, land acknowledgements, or single events. The Northern and Indigenous Outreach Pilot Project seeks to go much further. By working to understand the everyday needs of communities, from workplace negotiations to living conditions and ongoing struggles, our commitment is about truly listening to Indigenous workers and becoming a dependable ally standing up against unfair treatment.

We will be there to hear their concerns about precarious employment, identifying abusive workplace conditions, and understanding the immense cost-of-living challenges. These challenges disproportionately affect those living in isolated areas, where necessities are expensive, wages are often low, and access to essential services can be limited, and disproportionately impact women in particular.

This feet-on-the-ground approach advances our national commitment to reconciliation. CUPE's Strategic Directions call on us to advocate for policy changes that address historical injustices, improve the representation of Indigenous workers in our union and build local leadership, strengthen our relationships with progressive Indigenous organizations, and improve the quality of life for Indigenous peoples.

The Northern and Indigenous Outreach Pilot Project is the Saskatchewan-based roadmap of how to implement these objectives through community-driven actions, placing relationship-building at the heart of every strategy.

Unique northern realities

Those who live in Saskatchewan's north often contend with very different realities than those living in southern regions. The economy is marked by small, scattered workplaces. Employers may exercise considerable authority because there are few jobs to choose from. Combined with the high cost of essentials such as food and housing, this imbalance of power makes workers vulnerable.

Recent research from the Centre for Future Work illustrates how contracts negotiated by unions help close wage gaps and improve access to benefits and overall job stability for equity-deserving groups. These findings support our efforts to strengthen collective bargaining and bring tangible improvements to communities. They are also directly relevant to Indigenous communities in Saskatchewan's north, where workers face challenges associated with high costs of living, shortages of good-paying jobs, and significant barriers to challenging unfair employer practices.

The opportunity to join a union empowers workers to play a significant role in improving their workplaces. They can make their workplaces more representative and culturally sensitive, ensuring transparent pathways for career advancement. Moreover, by educating members on anti-discrimination practices, unions can foster safer, fairer workplaces and communities.



Genuine, long-term community engagement and collective bargaining can yield concrete improvements — both in individual livelihoods and in the well-being of communities at large.

While unionizing can be a powerful tool, our first step is not to push for union sign-ups. Instead, CUPE's focus is to listen and understand the community context, learn from local leaders, be an ally in community gatherings, and share stories of how joining forces can benefit everyone.

United school divisions

One priority is to support education workers all across Saskatchewan, most importantly the province's multiple northern school divisions. Currently, each one of these 16 school divisions bargains on its own. While larger school divisions in big cities have more resources, smaller remote school divisions struggle to attain parity. This fragmentation weakens workers' bargaining power and results in inconsistent wages, benefits, and job security.

By encouraging school divisions to coordinate and push for a unified strategy, we can achieve fair compensation, a more equitable distribution of resources, and stability.

We already have a foothold in places like the Métis community of Île-à-la-Crosse, where support staff in the local school division belong to our union. We aim to build upon these relationships to learn from them, identify community ambassadors, and show how collective agreements have improved their workplaces. Their personal stories can inspire others in nearby communities to consider union membership as a way to achieve workplace fairness.

Education and shared learning

Our pilot project also involves educating CUPE's own members and staff about Indigenous rights, cultural realities, and the social landscape of the north. Many of us live and work in large cities and may not fully grasp the hurdles northern communities face. By creating more opportunities for our union to learn from northern communities — by traveling north, attending training sessions, participating in cultural events, or engaging directly with local groups — we will deepen our understanding, respect and meaningful collaboration.

Meanwhile, we will reach out to unorganized workers to provide culturally appropriate materials in English, Michif, Cree, and Dene, explaining who we are and how we can collaborate. Our aim is to demystify unions, reduce fear around complicated processes, and create welcoming spaces for dialogue and follow-up.

Showing up, following through

The Northern and Indigenous Outreach Pilot Project encourages sponsoring and participating in Indigenous community events — festivals, gatherings, celebrations — and connecting with local leadership beforehand to provide support. We will set up booths and spark meaningful one-on-one conversations with information about CUPE's actions and campaigns like *Water is life*. And we're committed to stay in touch after events to ensure the relationship does not end once the tents come down. Our focus is on consistent, long-term engagement to real partnerships.

Our approach acknowledges historical harms and we pledge to address them by collaborating with communities, rather than imposing solutions. This sets the stage for future organizing efforts that are more impactful and culturally appropriate, ensuring that local values shape workplace policies. CUPE's work toward reconciliation and its reasonably long history is a symbol of our genuine efforts to connect and advocate for issues that impact Indigenous peoples. Our strategy invites mutual respect and open dialogue to prove that CUPE members truly care about the north's priorities.

Model for the future

Though the pilot project is rooted in Saskatchewan's remote and Indigenous communities who have been left behind, the lessons we learn can apply to our Indigenous outreach all across Canada. As we demonstrate concrete outcomes — like better living and working conditions — we can adapt this model to other provinces and territories. Indeed, many Indigenous communities share similar challenges with remoteness, high cost of living, and a history of being left out of key decisions.

Building solid relationships in remote regions is not a quick fix. This work demands time, patience, and genuine dialogue. It means showing up consistently, being open to learning from community members, and a long-term commitment to delivering results that improve workers' lives. Northern communities deserve to have their voices heard and their unique realities respected. By doing so, we hope to build a more inclusive labour movement — one that amplifies Indigenous voices, allows them to shape union practices and addresses their concerns head-on.

The work of reconciliation belongs to everyone, and as Canada's largest union, we recognize that we have a major role to play in that work. If this pilot project succeeds, it will mark an important step toward true reconciliation and stronger, healthier communities. Our vision is a future where northern and Indigenous workers feel empowered in their workplaces and communities. We are moving beyond short-lived efforts to form enduring partnerships in our shared fight for issues that matter most. We believe this approach can bring lasting change — not just in Saskatchewan's north, but from coast to coast to coast.



COLOMBIA: A LONG ROAD OF SOLIDARITY

In November 2024, CUPE's National President Mark Hancock led a CUPE delegation to the Valle del Cauca region in southwest Colombia to meet with our partner organization, the Association for Research and Social Action (Nomadesc). Founded in 1999 and based in Cali, Nomadesc is a human rights organization that supports and accompanies social movements, labour unions, women's groups, and Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and rural communities in their fight for justice and a better world.



NOMADESC'S NAME COMES FROM **NOMAD** (ONE WHO MOVES FROM ONE PLACE TO ANOTHER) AND **DESC** (THE SPANISH ABBREVIATION FOR ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT).

URAL

Nomadesc facilitated inspiring meetings with human rights defenders and youth leaders. They shared how their communities have been affected by armed conflict, criminal and state violence, and displacement caused by infrastructure megaprojects.

We had an especially moving encounter with the mother of Nicolás García Guerrero, whose life was cut short when he was shot by police during a wave of demonstrations in 2021. Nicolás was a graffiti artist and the father of a young child.

The protests were sparked by tax increases, corruption, and health care reforms under then-president Iván Duque, and drew remarkable numbers of youth into the streets. Many felt their social and economic conditions were so poor they had nothing left to lose. Across the country, government forces killed 84 people during the protests, and families are still seeking justice for their tragic loss.



Most of the people we met were current students or graduates of Nomadesc's Intercultural University of the Peoples. The mobile university operates outside of conventional classrooms, providing education directly where farmers and Indigenous peoples live. It values local wisdom and traditions, supporting students to bring what they learn back to their communities.

“One of the people we met really stood out. He was a young guy, an artist, a rapper, and an activist. In the year before the protest, he was shot with a rubber bullet and lost an eye. And even though Colombia now has what we call a progressive president and vice-president, there still is a lot of danger, there still is a lot of oppression. Some of the stories we heard were horrific in how folks are treated there,” says Mark Hancock.



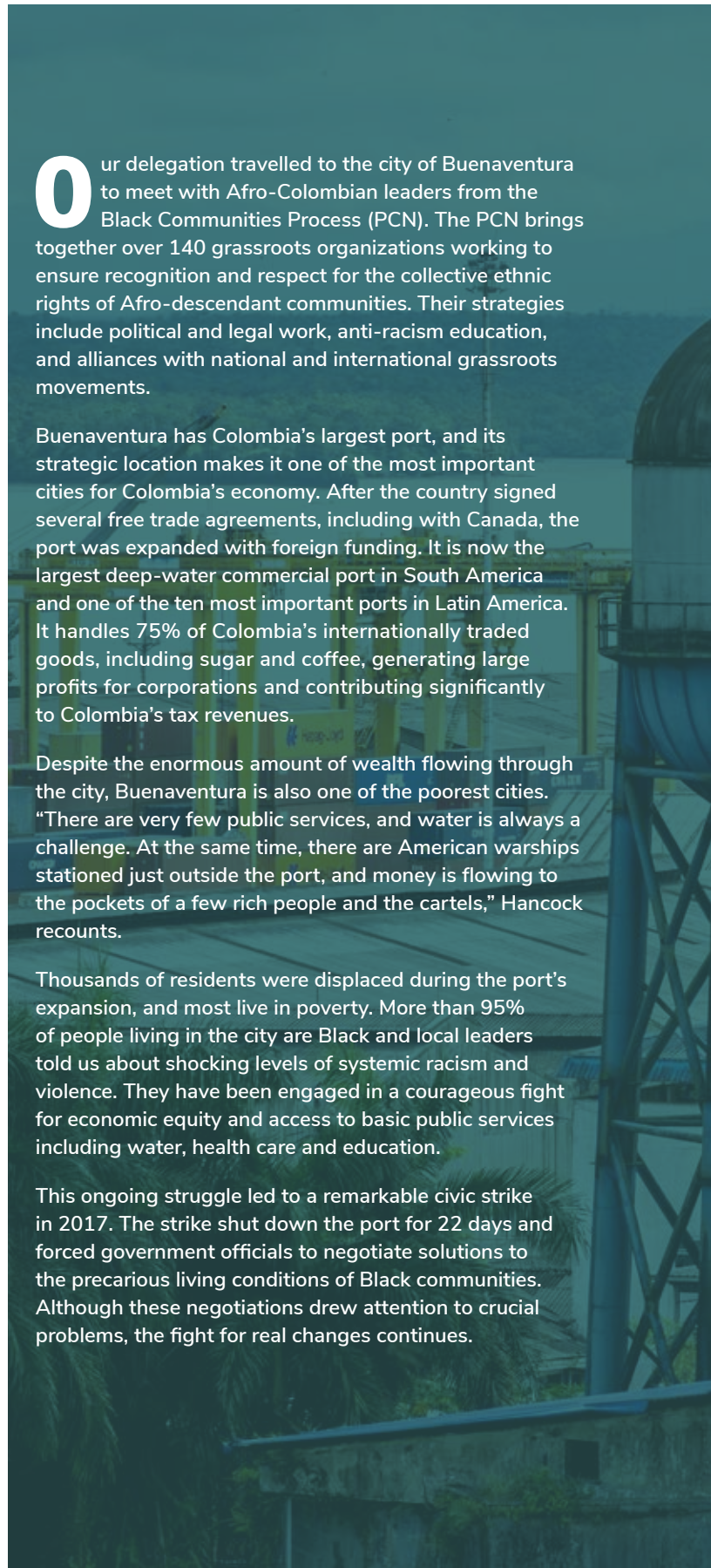
Our delegation travelled to the city of Buenaventura to meet with Afro-Colombian leaders from the Black Communities Process (PCN). The PCN brings together over 140 grassroots organizations working to ensure recognition and respect for the collective ethnic rights of Afro-descendant communities. Their strategies include political and legal work, anti-racism education, and alliances with national and international grassroots movements.

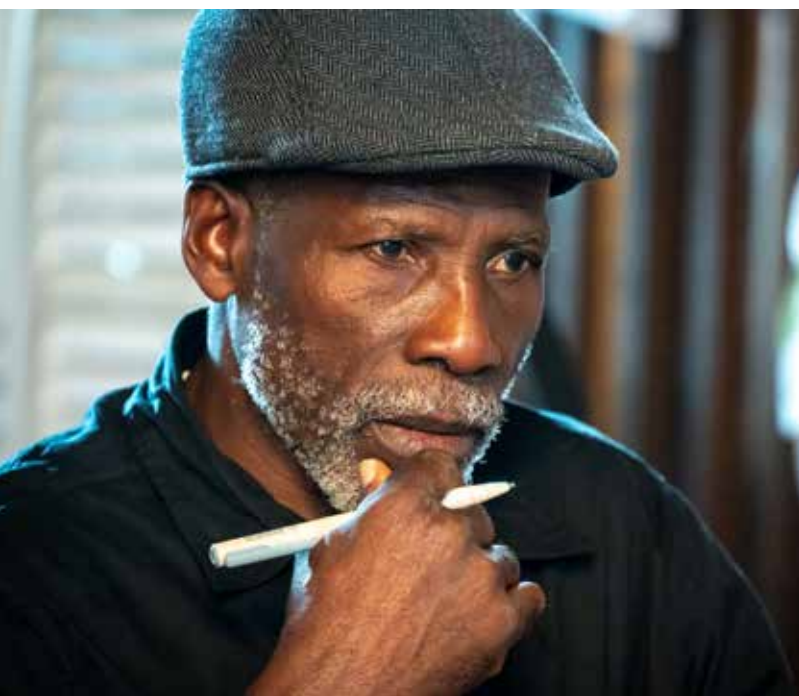
Buenaventura has Colombia's largest port, and its strategic location makes it one of the most important cities for Colombia's economy. After the country signed several free trade agreements, including with Canada, the port was expanded with foreign funding. It is now the largest deep-water commercial port in South America and one of the ten most important ports in Latin America. It handles 75% of Colombia's internationally traded goods, including sugar and coffee, generating large profits for corporations and contributing significantly to Colombia's tax revenues.

Despite the enormous amount of wealth flowing through the city, Buenaventura is also one of the poorest cities. “There are very few public services, and water is always a challenge. At the same time, there are American warships stationed just outside the port, and money is flowing to the pockets of a few rich people and the cartels,” Hancock recounts.

Thousands of residents were displaced during the port's expansion, and most live in poverty. More than 95% of people living in the city are Black and local leaders told us about shocking levels of systemic racism and violence. They have been engaged in a courageous fight for economic equity and access to basic public services including water, health care and education.

This ongoing struggle led to a remarkable civic strike in 2017. The strike shut down the port for 22 days and forced government officials to negotiate solutions to the precarious living conditions of Black communities. Although these negotiations drew attention to crucial problems, the fight for real changes continues.





We also met with Victor Vidal, one of the 2017 Civic Strike Committee spokespersons who later became the mayor of Buenaventura.

“I met Victor Vidal years ago when he was part of a delegation visiting Canadian unions,” Hancock recalls. “I was also in Colombia in 2019, when he was elected mayor of Buenaventura. I remember hanging out with him at his campaign office and, as the night went on, it became pretty clear that Victor was going to win. It was an exciting time – it was a great opportunity, but it also came with a potential price because his life would be in danger.

When we were there last November, Victor had just finished his term as mayor, but he still had security with him because, as a progressive leader, the threats against him hadn’t gone away. He made some gains, but he was disappointed that despite his great plans, he was able to accomplish less than 10% of what he wanted to do.” Victor Vidal’s experience confirms that there are structural barriers to progressive change that cannot be undone overnight with one election victory.





Our delegation also met with members of Sinaltrainal (the National Union of Food Workers), in the town of Bugalagrande. The union has been in a labour dispute with Nestlé de Colombia S.A. since the company banned union representatives from engaging with workers. In April 2024, union members set up an encampment outside the gates of the Nestlé plant, and they have stood strong despite attempts to dismantle their camp.

“These workers were in their tents with their entire families, with their kids. If the families were there, they believed a shooting or an attack on the workers would be less likely. But there had been a shooting five days before we arrived,” Hancock relates.





“While we were there, government officials called a meeting, and the union asked that we join as international observers. We agreed, of course, although I found out I’m not very good at being a quiet international observer,” says Hancock. “It was surreal to see two union leaders showing up alone because they didn’t want to put more lives at risk, in a room full of government and employer representatives, plus four cops. Later, they told us how much our presence had changed what they thought the meeting would be like. Our being there had made a difference, and it’s something that I’ll never forget.”



CUPE's delegation returned to Canada with a renewed sense of the power and necessity of international solidarity in the trade union movement and among all oppressed and marginalized communities fighting for change.









PROFILE WESLEY LESOSKY

LEADING THE FIGHT FOR FLIGHT ATTENDANTS' RIGHTS

Wesley Lesosky has been a steadfast advocate for flight attendants' rights, currently serving his third term as president of CUPE's Air Canada Component. He is also president of CUPE's Airline Division, representing over 18,500 flight attendants across ten airlines, leading efforts to secure fair treatment and safer working conditions for all workers in the sector.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Wesley was at the forefront of the fight for a safe return to flying as two thirds of CUPE's flight attendants were laid off almost overnight, and others had to work in unsafe conditions. Focused on mobilizing members, he is a firm believer that flight attendants can achieve better collective agreements and address the needs and challenges in the airline industry by making themselves heard, acknowledged and respected by the general public.

With air travel rebounding to pre-pandemic levels, Wesley is championing CUPE's campaign *Unpaid Work Won't Fly* as flight attendants on duty perform hours of critical tasks to ensure passenger safety, often unpaid. As a general rule, flight attendants are only compensated while the aircraft is in motion – which means countless duties critical to passenger safety are not paid.

“An hour worked should be an hour paid. The era of unpaid time on the ground for flight attendants will come to an end.”

Question 1

How did you end up in your career as a flight attendant, and how did you wind up president of the Air Canada Component and CUPE's Airline Division?

I was drawn into the aviation sector when I was working at a Safeway grocery store. Right around that time, Safeway workers across British Columbia were about to go on strike, so my transition into the aviation industry and the union movement really went hand in hand.

I was hired as a flight attendant at Canada 3000, a discount charter airline, and I got into the union movement when we began organizing the flight attendants there with CUPE. When Canada 3000 collapsed, I joined Zip at Air Canada, and I became the very first union representative at Zip. I also held a whole bunch of other roles within my union before ending up here as president.



Question 2

Who are some of the people who inspired you to become the leader you are today?

My first local president, Denise Callahan, played a huge part in inspiring and empowering me to take on a leadership role. Within CUPE, Nathalie Stringer was someone who really supported me to take on a bigger role. We had challenging conversations but really important conversations.

There is so much to love about being a union activist. I love the organizing aspect like what is happening at Porter – where cabin crew are excited to be able to grow their voice and improve their working conditions by joining CUPE. I love the Airline Division, because it gives us a lot of perspective on what's happening across our industry beyond our own airlines and our own locals. It gives us a way of identifying challenges, and fixing those challenges, and making life better for our members. It's about learning, and I embrace that aspect a lot.

Question 3

What is your favourite thing about being a flight attendant?

It's the people that I work with and the incredible diversity of backgrounds and, of course, the passengers. I'm someone who embraces culture, people, and experiences, and this is certainly a career that has allowed me to have so many diverse conversations on each flight.

Question 4

What are some things about a flight attendant's job that the public probably doesn't know, but should?

Most people don't know that we work countless unpaid hours every week – but we're working pretty hard to change that.

If you're a firefighter, a bank teller, an electrician, or almost any other profession in Canada, when you show up for work and perform work duties, you're on the clock and you're compensated for your time. For flight attendants in Canada, that simply isn't the case. We're at work, in uniform, performing work-related duties long before we start – and long after we stop – getting paid. It's things like prepping the aircraft, boarding and deplaning passengers, gate duties, safety checks and training. Flight attendants perform 35 hours of unpaid work, on average, every month while taking responsibility for hundreds of lives.

The other thing most people don't consider is the sheer amount of time that we're away. We're away from family and our relationships all the time. We miss most holidays with our loved ones because those are the busiest times for our profession. That can be really challenging and has a mental health toll as well.





Question 5

You were once terminated from your job because of your sexual orientation. Is that something that motivates you in your work today to empower members and fight for justice?

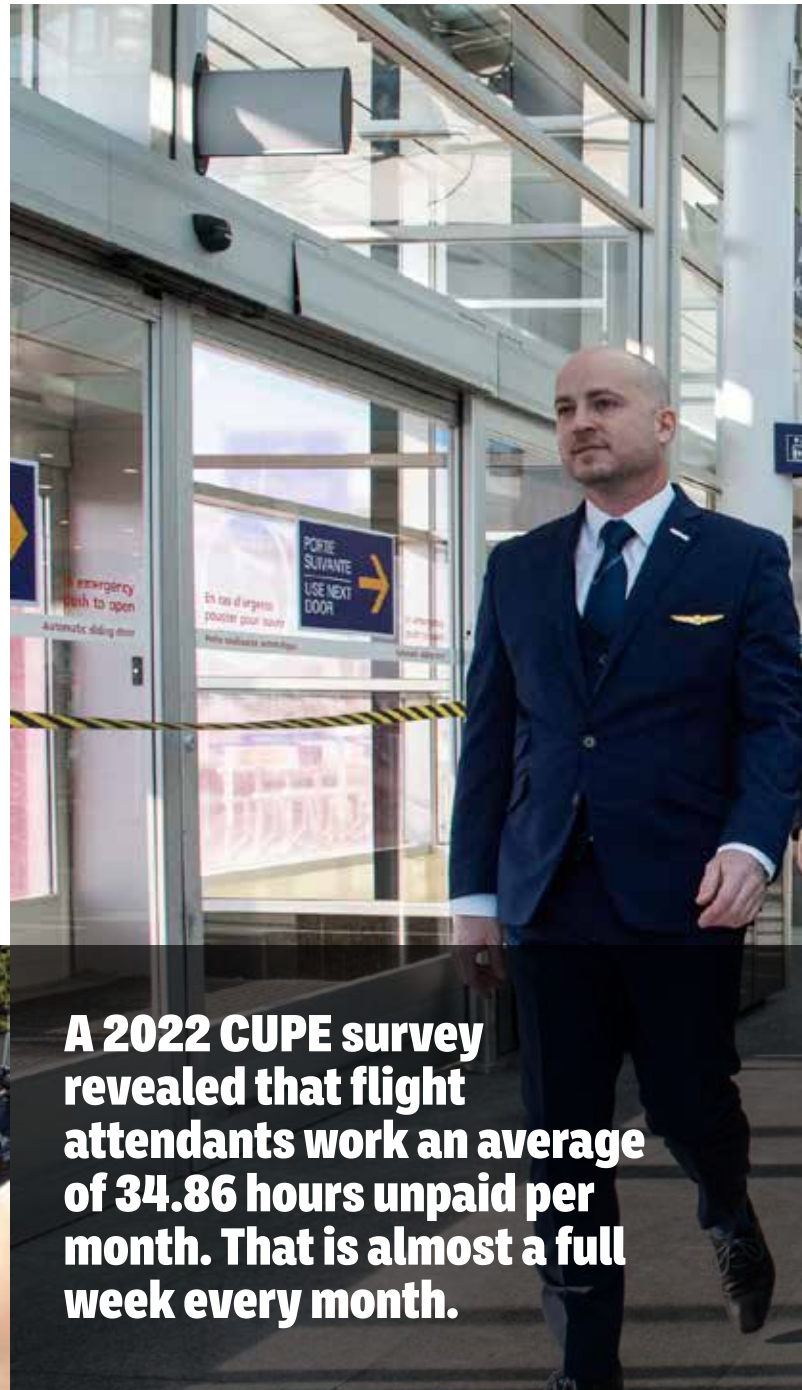
It's something that comes to mind for sure, but one of the things that drew to me to this industry was the level of acceptance that has historically been pretty unique to this profession. Looking at where things were back then and where things are today shows you just how far we've come. Union activism has played a huge role in advancing those rights. We've made a lot of progress.

Question 6

What is your biggest hope for the future of your work?

Right now, all of my efforts are in getting a fair collective agreement for our Air Canada and Air Canada Rouge members before the current agreement expires in March 2025. Our agreement is 10 years-old and our members have fallen far, far behind. So my North Star these days is a contract with substantial improvements to wages and benefits and pensions, and a contract that makes unpaid work a thing of the past in our industry.

Visit **UnpaidWorkWontFly.ca** for more information about the campaign, events, and the work that flight attendants do every day.



A 2022 CUPE survey revealed that flight attendants work an average of 34.86 hours unpaid per month. That is almost a full week every month.





- Flight attendants are not paid for boarding, which can take up to an hour.
- Flight attendants are not paid for their pre-flight prep and safety checks.
- 99.5% of flight attendants aren't paid when they are checking in through security, even though they are at work in uniform.
- 98.6% of flight attendants aren't paid while passengers deplane after a flight, even though they are still assisting passengers disembark.
- 75% of flight attendants are only paid a partial wage for mandatory regulatory training, even though airlines and the federal government require several training days per year.
- 98.4% of flight attendants are not paid when the plane is being held at the gate after landing, even though they are still assisting passengers, often in elevated temperatures.

CUPE is Canada's flight attendant union, representing approximately 18,500 flight attendants at ten airlines nationwide, including Air Canada, WestJet, Air Transat, Sunwing, Calm Air, PAL Airlines, Flair Airlines, Canadian North, Pascan, and Pivot Airlines.



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