

*This profile is intended to provide CUPE members with basic information about the sector they work in from a national perspective. Find all our sector profiles and more information online at [cupe.ca](http://cupe.ca)*

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CUPE represents over 39,000 workers in the energy sector in Alberta, Ontario, Manitoba, Quebec and in Federal Crown Corporations. They are employed as trades and maintenance workers, customer service representatives, accountants, administration assistants, billing and records agents, communications staff, drafters, programmer analysts, technologists, power line workers, technicians, clerks, skilled trades workers, atomic energy workers and call center workers.

Our members work mainly in electricity generation, distribution, and transmission for public and private companies.

CUPE collective agreements cover the following members:

- 800 in Alberta
- 16,390 in Ontario
- 800 in Manitoba
- 20,700 in Quebec
- several hundred in Federal crown companies.

## Issues

### ELECTRICITY IN CANADA

The electricity sector in Canada directly employs about 81,000 workers and indirectly employs another 40,000 workers.

Canada uses more electricity per person than any other country, but most of this electricity is produced using sources that do not contribute to climate change. Canada produces three per cent of the world's electricity, and Canadians make up 0.5 per cent of the world's population. Canada is a large electrical

energy producer and a net exporter of low emission electricity. Total generation capacity in 2017 was 145.213 gigawatts. Of actual generation, 81 per cent comes from low or zero emission generation as follows:

- 60% Hydro
- 14.6% Nuclear
- 9% Natural gas and other combustible fuels excluding coal
- 9% Coal
- 5% Wind
- 0.5% Solar

Electricity covers 20 per cent of our total energy needs in Canada.

Canada also exports nearly 50 terawatt hours of clean electricity to the USA every year.

The government has signed various international treaties agreeing to reduce our dependence on greenhouse gas emitting energy, including the 2015 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Changes include phasing out coal power generation by 2030. This transition away from coal has meant a focus on a Just Transition for electricity generation workers and their communities, with unions fighting for government investment in retraining and redeployment of affected workers.

The future of low carbon energy is through electrification of infrastructure, the expansion of the increased efficient use, and generation of low-carbon electrical power.

## **PRIVATIZATION**

Across Canada, investment in wind and solar energy generation has been made through public subsidies of private investment. This private sector investment has enabled the rise of private ownership of electricity generation. Provinces have promoted private and cooperative solar, wind and tidal generation projects. This approach undermines publicly-owned and centrally-managed electricity generation.

CUPE's position is that green energy jobs should be public sector jobs for an effective and fair energy future.

The energy sector in Ontario, Manitoba and Quebec is under increased threat of privatization through financialization and the selling-off of public utilities and infrastructure. However, the immediate short-term threats to energy sector workers is the further corporatization of utilities and more contracting out.

In Alberta, EPCOR a municipally owned utility in Edmonton has divested entirely from its power generation business, selling it to the private sector. The utility has nonetheless retained control of distribution and transmission, as well as sector technologies such as signals and metering. ENMAX, which is owned by the City of Calgary, is investing in the expansion of public solar and wind generation projects.

In Quebec, CUPE locals are campaigning to maintain public ownership of power with an emphasis on bringing new wind generation under the provincial public utility, Hydro-Québec. The loss of many jobs in the atomic energy sector, following the 2012 closure of the Gentilly-2 nuclear plant (decommissioning continues), illustrated the Quebec government's lack of adequate planning for a fair and equitable transition for displaced workers. Just Transition plans are needed to protect workers and their communities as the industry continues to transform.

A global trend in the privatization of public assets has emerged called "asset recycling" that seeks to monetize and marketize public assets for private gain. Asset recycling can take the form of sale and lease-back agreements, concession arrangements, franchises or the private management of public infrastructure. An example of this move of governments to gain short-term (and short sighted) revenue from privatization is Ontario's privatization of its transmission company Hydro One. Money from the sale was directed to an asset trust to fund infrastructure projects.

This new threat to public energy comes in addition to privatization's continuing creep in the energy sector. Techniques to extend the reach of privatization include incentives for the private ownership of decentralized renewable generation, the private development of new direct-current transmission lines for export, and the selling-off of local distribution companies.

In the UK and much of Europe, the renationalization of privatized utilities, including electricity utilities, has gained the support of the majority of the public. Calls for renationalization of electrical and other utilities are also growing in Australia and countries in Africa, along with calls for increased regulation and a transition to green energy generation.

In Germany, Spain and France, a process of "remunicipalization" is underway that involves bringing privatized utilities back under public ownership through city-wide cooperatives owned by local governments. Australian unions have also fought – and won – high profile campaigns against privatization of their generation capacity.

Internationally, the privatization of public utilities continues even as people become wary of the failures and broken promises of privatized monopoly utilities. These include increase in costs that privatization has brought in the UK, Germany, Australia, USA, India and Nigeria.

## **COVID-19**

Many workers in the energy sector have adapted to new working arrangements – including working from home – during the COVID-19 pandemic. In most areas of the country energy sector workers did not face layoffs, however, in Manitoba, the Pallister government used COVID-19 to provide cover for their ideological attacks on public workers, claiming that layoffs of Manitoba Hydro were necessary to help the government respond to the pandemic. CUPE 998 was able to reach an agreement that would prevent any layoffs of CUPE members.

## **Bargaining**

While the federal government regulates the environmental impacts of electricity generation – such as watersheds for hydro-electric production, atomic energy and inter-provincial transmission – all other aspects of the energy sector are provincial responsibilities. Electrical generation, distribution and transmission fall under provincial jurisdiction, organized into sub-provincial corporations in Ontario and Alberta. Structures for bargaining mirror these arrangements.

Ontario, for example, has many bargaining units across the electricity market. Hydro One agreements are regularly used as a base for comparison by provincial and other employers at local distribution companies. Of concern in Ontario is the continued increase of temporary and contract workers at Hydro One and Ontario Power Generation. This is a deliberate targeting of workers' wages and benefits to contain costs.

Our one local in Manitoba engages in informal communication with Unifor and IBEW locals to facilitate bargaining. CUPE engages in centralized bargaining in Quebec, through a voluntary union coalition. In Alberta, CUPE has one utility local and one municipal local covering members in the municipal utility.

Convincing governments to take a medium to long-term view of retention and recruitment of electricity workers has been a struggle and will likely remain an issue for some time. CUPE members in the electricity sector expect to be subject to continued pressure to give up their defined benefit pension plans, and switch to target benefit or defined contribution plans. Contracting out and the increase of temporary hires remain issues at bargaining tables across the sector.

## **Campaigns**

Ongoing CUPE local campaigns include health and safety, campaigns for public ownership; a plan for funding a fair and sustainable transition to a low carbon economy through calls for a Just Transition; and pushing governments to plan for succession in the industry through training and recruitment.

CUPE works with allies to keep energy public all over the world. Our international electricity campaigns support public ownership of the energy sector, push for action to address climate change and expand international coordination of energy sector policy.

CUPE works directly with energy unions in other countries, including the Electrical Trades Union of Australia, Mexican utility workers and the CGT in France to support and learn from their militant campaigns against contracting out and wage suppression. CUPE also works through the sector committee of Public Services International and other global union organizations like IndustriALL, Right to Energy – SOS Future, and Trade Unions for Energy Democracy.