



LABOUR'S DEFENCE OF PUBLIC SERVICES

THE ALBERTA LABOUR HISTORY INSTITUTE
2022

WHAT IS THE ALBERTA LABOUR HISTORY INSTITUTE?

The Alberta Labour History Institute was founded in 1999 to give working people a chance to preserve their own stories in their own words.

We are a group of trade unionists, community activists, archivists, and historians dedicated to the collection, preservation, and dissemination of the stories of Alberta's working people and their organizations.

Oral history, mainly via videos, has always been the major form of research that ALHI undertakes. Our videos are available in our office as well as at the Provincial Archives of Alberta. We supplement the oral histories with archival and library research. We post full transcripts on our website, along with podcasts of what we view as the best excerpts.

We've used our oral history materials to create films, booklets, annual calendars, and a book, all of which are available directly on our website or via links from the website. We also provide advice to unions re archiving and re educational materials. Most "deliverables" for the Alberta Federation of Labour centennial celebration in 2012—the book, a booklet, six videos, and various posters—were ALHI creations.

We've also sponsored workshops and conferences and film nights that double as educational events and provide us with interviewees. For example, in 2002, on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the Edmonton Hunger March, participants who were still alive spoke at our commemorative workshop and we recorded their words.

We sponsored a conference on Alberta labour history in 2012 as part of the AFL centennial events. It included a combination of activists telling their stories plus academic sessions. We had a similar conference in 2014 and then in 2016, we marked the 30-year anniversary of the Gainers Strike and other major strikes that made up the "Alberta hot summer of '86" with an Edmonton workshop that included the showing of a video ballad by Maria Dunn and our videographer Don Bouzek on the Gainers workers. The video ballad was also performed in Calgary and Red Deer.

In 2019 we hosted workshops and concerts across Alberta on "The Centennial of the Great Labour Revolt of 1919" and produced an accompanying video, display panels, and a booklet.

A recent ALHI project is our "Indigenous Labour History Project," which involves a major effort to gather the stories of First Nations and Métis people. We've already produced a video on the Métis ironworkers who did the most dangerous construction work on the skyscrapers of downtown Edmonton. It's entitled "Waltzing with the Angels" and can be viewed on our website.

If you would like to join with ALHI in carrying out our mission to tell the history of Alberta's working people, please e-mail us at office@albertalabourhistory.org

Or perhaps just tell us a story or send us pictures or artifacts you think should be on our website. If you are interested in learning more about ALHI, starting a Chapter in your community, or making a financial contribution to support our work, please email us at office@albertalabourhistory.org

Please check out our website at albertalabourhistory.org/about-alhi/

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Collection Preservation Education

LABOUR'S DEFENCE OF PUBLIC SERVICES

Labour movement political advocacy has been responsible in most countries, including Canada, for the establishment of health, education, and social programs and for their expansion to meet the needs of all citizens. Trade unions have also fought for the rights of those who provide those services to decent pay and benefits.

Through the years labour has frequently had to fight political and social forces that want to weaken both public services and the unions of public employees. Cutbacks and privatizations that benefit profiteers and the wealthy at the expense of working people and the most vulnerable citizens have eroded social protections that workers fought for decades to win. The union movement has responded with a variety of strategies. These include strikes, demonstrations, public education campaigns, and support for political parties that defend universal, affordable public services administered publicly, and workers' rights.

In Alberta the labour movement fought efforts of a right-wing Social Credit government to avoid implementing public medicare and to deny public service workers the right to have independent unions. Then it fought the determination of the Progressive Conservative government, which conceded unionism, to limit that right by denying public workers the right to strike. "Illegal" strikes by nurses, jail guards, and others during the 1980s demonstrated workers' resistance to being treated like slaves.

From 1945 to 1980, struggles by unions and other civil society groups to expand public services were mostly successful. Workers' militancy during World War II and insistence that they would not return to the destitution of the Great Depression earned concessions on social programs and union rights. But over four decades those gains have been whittled away. Ralph Klein's Progressive Conservatives slashed provincial government spending from 22 percent of provincial GDP in 1989 to a mere 13 percent by 2000. Services deteriorated and remaining public employees had unbearable workloads and shrunken paycheques. Union pressures to restore services, feasible workloads, and fair pay yielded some successes. But the pre-Klein status quo was never restored.

The election of the United Conservative Party in 2019 proved a huge blow to public services. The UCP wanted to deepen the cuts of the Klein period, and to privatize or contract out as much of public sector work as possible. Even while the COVID-19 pandemic raged in 2020 and 2021, and health sector workers worked so much overtime in dangerous conditions that burnout was common, the UCP insisted that cuts in pay, jobs, and services must continue. The public service workers and their unions pledged to resist such cuts, with strikes if necessary.



GREAT DEPRESSION MILITANCY

Police block marchers' route just prior to charging crowd during 1932 Hunger March.
Provincial Archives of Alberta, nc-6-130141.

The Great Depression of the 1930s refers to a period of economic contraction in which employers drastically reduced employment with the result that there were few consumers and no incentives for private investors to invest. Governments could have printed money and taxed the wealthy to create social spending that would produce consumers and rekindle the economy. Instead they cut social assistance spending to the bone.

Unemployed single men, who provided the backbone of the protesters against mistreatment of the unemployed, were removed from social assistance altogether and forced to move to remote camps. There they lived in primitive conditions and received 25 cents per day for their efforts.

The resistance of relief camp workers, including a March to Ottawa in 1935 that was forcibly ended by the RCMP in Regina, discredited the Conservative government of the time. The Liberals, elected in the federal election that year, closed the camps but failed to provide much assistance to the unemployed. Nevertheless, the relief strikes left a legacy of militancy that would force reforms after World War II.

JANUARY 2022

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POST-WAR STRUGGLES

Meatpacking workers vote after slowdown strike in 1944. Pattern bargaining would subsequently become the norm in the meatpacking industry for four decades before a new vicious corporatism caused companies in that industry to attempt to unravel all the gains made by meatpacking workers since the war.

During World War II, workers took advantage of full employment in a mobilized, government-directed economy to form unions and demand job security, higher wages, and social security measures. The unions demanded that governments provide minimum wages, maximum hours, and social security programs for the entire population. Growing support for the social democratic Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), which called for nationalization of industry, caused the pro-capitalist parties to propose a “historic compromise” in which capitalists would concede the need for social programs and trade unions.

That bargain and ongoing pressures from unions and civil society groups gradually yielded “welfare state” measures such as medicare and the Canada Pension Plan. The trade union movement in 1985 enrolled 38 percent of non-farm workers and influenced government policies in ways that benefited non-union workers as well. But important elements within the corporate community regarded the “historic compromise” as temporary. The union movement was caught by surprise as its decades-long achievements came under attack from corporations, commercial media, and the old-line political parties.

FEBRUARY 2022

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20	21 Family Day	22	23	24	25	26
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THE NEOLIBERAL ATTACK

The "historic compromise" initially mostly benefited male workers in the private sector. By the 1980s, public sector workers, and particularly women, were tired of being treated as second-class citizens. Nurses in Alberta demanded to be regarded as hard-working professionals who expected their pay and their say in working conditions to match their important social contributions. Three province-wide nursing strikes in Alberta from 1979 to 1988 demonstrated nurses' determination to achieve changes.

This photo is from the 1988 strike. Courtesy United Nurses of Alberta.

By the early 1980s, conservative forces, led by big business, were well organized to undermine the "historic compromise." That meant attempting to destroy unions or put them "in their place," as well as an onslaught against government social programs. The new dominant ideology was referred to as "neoliberalism." Classic liberalism extolled free markets while "welfare liberalism" accepted some state intervention in the economy to partially compensate victims of the greed that drives market economies. Neoliberalism called for the state to partner with corporations to increase private profits while cutting social benefits. Its success required a weakening of unions.

In the United States, neoliberalism was responsible for reducing "union density," the percentage of all workers enrolled in unions, from its peak of 35 percent in 1954 to 11 percent in 2020. In the United Kingdom, the reduction was from 52 percent in 1979 to 24 percent in 2020. In Canada, the 38 percent of 1985 had become 31 percent in 2020. In Alberta only 24 percent of workers were unionized. But the unions that remained fought to maintain workers' rights.

MARCH 2022

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6	7	8 <small>International Women's Day</small>	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17 <small>St Patrick's Day</small>	18	19
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THE NEOLIBERAL ASSAULT ON WORKERS: 1970^s & 1980^s

The construction unions and the Alberta Federation of Labour have consistently campaigned for double breasting to be banned in Alberta as it is in the rest of the country. But so far, no Alberta government has legislated an end to the practice. The AFL convention in 2017 organized a demonstration to attempt to get the NDP government to act on the issue in 2017.

The initial anti-union assault of the neoliberal period targeted both public and private sector workers. In Alberta, the assault on private sector unionized employees was particularly aimed at construction unions which in the 1970s included about 70 percent of all sector workers.

During the 1980s recession, construction companies tried to destroy unions by forming dummy, non-union companies to which they transferred contracts from the real company which did have union contracts. The Alberta Progressive Conservative government of Peter Lougheed regarded such “double breasting” as legal, alone among Canadian governments, and no government to date has made this scam behaviour illegal.

Meanwhile, in 1977, the Lougheed government formally made illegal the right to strike for public sector workers, making arbitrators, the choice of whom over which government had a veto, the decision-makers regarding all contract disputes over both wages, benefits, and working conditions. Only after a Supreme Court decision in 2015 that gave all but absolutely “essential” workers the right to strike was that right restored in Alberta.

APRIL 2022

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Easter Sunday	Easter Monday					
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THE KLEIN ASSAULT ON THE PUBLIC SECTOR

Jim Cardinal, Communications, Energy, and Paperworkers Union (now part of UNIFOR).
Courtesy Alberta Federation of Labour.

Alberta and federal government cutbacks on public sector services reached unprecedented levels in the 1990s. Federal payments to provinces for medical care, postsecondary education, and social services fell drastically and federal housing support disappeared. In 1995 a Liberal government ended the Canada Assistance Plan it had created three decades earlier and that had required provinces to provide social assistance to everyone in need. Provinces responded by cutting their own programs and grants to municipalities.

But Alberta led the way in destruction of public programs with double-digit cuts to health, education at all levels, social welfare, and much more, reducing public expenditures by 21 percent in two years, far more than the federal cuts to the province, and firing tens of thousands of public employees.

Those who remained experienced infeasible workloads and were forced to take a 5 percent wage cut in one year with no increases for the next two years, which, after inflation, meant a 17 percent wage cut. Public services deteriorated despite workers' best efforts.

MAY 2022

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1 <small>International Workers' Day</small>	2	3	4	5	6	7
8 <small>Mother's Day</small>	9	10	11	12	13	14
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22	23 <small>Victoria Day</small>	24	25	26	27	28
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WORKERS RESPOND TO THE KLEIN CUTS

The trade union movement denounced the Klein government's actions. But it had not organized its members to be ready for such drastic cuts and privatizations. There were demonstrations and public meetings, but no strikes or job actions. So Klein felt he could bulldoze ahead.

Almost three years into the cutbacks one act of resistance triggered many others and forced Klein into partial retreat. In November, 1995, the Calgary Health Authority announced a contracting out of laundry work. The workers affected were mostly Caribbean and Asian immigrant women. They had earlier taken a 28 percent cut in wages to preserve their strenuous, dangerous jobs. Laundry workers at the Calgary General Hospital, CUPE members, called in sick and then AUPE laundry workers at the Foothills Hospital did the same. These illegal wildcat strikes were followed by workers in another four hospitals and nursing homes wildcatting while hundreds of other healthcare workers worked to rule. As other workers began discussing a general strike, Klein offered the unions an 18 month delay in contracting out. He also ended his cutting spree.

Artist Mary Joyce depicts the resistance of the Calgary laundry workers to neoliberal efforts to privatize their public, unionized jobs.

Courtesy Graphic History Collective.

JUNE 2022

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Father's Day		National Indigenous Peoples Day				
26	27	28	29	30		



THE UCP PROMISES A RETURN TO AUSTERITY

Upon taking office, the UCP passed Bill 9, which delayed wage arbitration for the promised third year of existing contracts. Affected unions protested in the rotunda of the legislature on June 13, 2019. The labour leaders being interviewed include (left to right): Guy Smith, president of AUPE, Gil McGowan, president of AFL, and Mike Parker, president of HSAA.

Photo by Tony Clark. Courtesy Alberta Federation of Labour.

Each time oil prices fell precipitously, Progressive Conservative governments, which failed to save money in good times for spending in hard times, announced austerity plans. In 2015, a five-year austerity plan presented by Premier Jim Prentice before a provincial election produced a backlash that elected the first NDP government in Alberta.

Premier Rachel Notley resisted austerity and increased social spending in some areas while easing some restrictions against union organizing. But disillusionment with an ongoing recession caused by lingering low international oil prices led to the return to power of conservative forces in 2019.

The United Conservative Party promised to freeze government social spending, ignoring inflation and population increases in an effort to reduce deficits and debt. It claimed that it could reduce spending while preserving services and front-line jobs. That was soon proved false. In 2020 and 2021 the new government announced many job reductions and privatizations. When the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020, the UCP were unwilling to change their priorities.

JULY 2022

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RESISTANCE TO UCP CUTS BEGINS

The demonstration against UCP cuts in Edmonton on February 27, 2020, just shortly before the pandemic shut down the province, was one of the largest demonstrations ever in that city.

Photo courtesy Paula E. Kirman/RadicalCitizenMedia.com

The UCP's first budget in fall, 2019 was marked by cuts to all social programs. The unions united in opposition to UCP plans to strip social guarantees, privatize services, and attack the security and wages of public employees. They sponsored teach-ins, demonstrations, and media campaigns to inform Albertans about the potential impact of the cuts and the determination of public employees to oppose UCP plans.

In February, 2020, a demonstration in Edmonton at the legislature in opposition to the cuts drew at least 10,000 people while a similar event in Calgary attracted over 4000 protesters. Friends of Medicare, Public Interest Alberta, the Parkland Institute, and other organizations also held rallies to warn Albertans about the consequences of the deep cuts and privatizations planned by the UCP. Plans for further demonstrations and job actions were suspended in mid-March, 2020.

The pandemic emphasized the essential character of the work performed by public employees and also made public gatherings dangerous. But the unions and their allies continued to campaign to pressure the UCP to withdraw its program to slash public services.

AUGUST 2022

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SHOWDOWN ON HEALTH POLICIES

By the summer of 2021, though the pandemic was still not over, the UCP's resolve to privatize healthcare programs and jobs, and reduce jobs and pay in what services remained under public auspices, had strengthened. Facts about the likely impacts on the public good would not change that resolve. Only public fightback could make a difference.

The healthcare unions worked together, along with the union movement as a whole, to make clear that they would not accept the staffing cutbacks and pay and benefits rollbacks that the UCP insisted upon.

Members of the United Nurses of Alberta, the Health Services Association of Alberta, and the Alberta Union of Public Employees were particularly threatened. Exhausted from the pandemic, they were not too tired to fight what they regarded as policies that would harm the services that they provided. Public protests and rallies began anew, and the threat of service shutdowns in order to protect health services in the long run was on the agenda.

Unions of health care workers, along with allies from other unions, held demonstrations at hospitals across the province during the summer of 2021 demanding an end to cutbacks in staffing and wages, and a solid plan to get the pandemic under control.

Photo by Kim Adonyi. Courtesy Health Sciences Association of Alberta.

SEPTEMBER 2022

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4	5 <small>Labour Day</small>	6	7	8	9	10
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SHOWDOWN ON EDUCATION POLICIES

The "March for What Matters" on February 27, 2020, in Edmonton drew over 10,000 protesters against UCP cutbacks and anti-union policies. Demonstrators against the UCP's cuts to education were an important component of this broad-based group of protesters. They included teachers who are members of the Alberta Teachers' Association and support workers who are members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE).

Photo by Codie McLachlan, Courtesy UNIFOR.

The education sector suffered major cuts before, during, and after the pandemic. With budgets cuts, class sizes grew and funds to assist children needing special help grew scarce. During the pandemic, as the schools moved on-line for the last 3.5 months of the 2019-20 school year, the UCP government fired all educational assistants and most caretakers for that period. In fall, 2020, teacher and staff requests for smaller classes, proper social distancing, and safe classroom ventilation were largely ignored. To add insult to injury, the government proposed a new highly ideological curriculum that offended most teachers, principals, school boards, and parents.

The Alberta Teachers' Association spoke out for teachers against the government's anti-public-education agenda and did a study of teachers' mental health that demonstrated that 80 percent of Alberta teachers were suffering some degree of burnout. Strikes in the United States among public school teachers demanding more public investment in public education struck a chord with many Alberta teachers tired of government austerity campaigns aimed at the schools.

OCTOBER 2022

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SHOWDOWN ON WORKERS' RIGHTS

Labour laws prohibit wildcat strikes. But when workers decide that an employer is stomping all over them, such strikes occur anyway. On October 26, 2020, thousands of hospital support workers across Alberta, members of the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees (AUPE), staged a wildcat strike against a mid-pandemic UCP government announcement that it would dismiss 11,000 of these workers, who risked their lives daily to deliver essential services during a health emergency. The Alberta Labour Relations Board ordered them back to work that day while refusing to listen to their complaints.

Photo by Abdul Malik. Courtesy Alberta Union of Provincial Employees.

The UCP passed two bills in 2020 regarding workers' rights. One bill reduced provisions meant to keep workplaces safe and the other reduced the ability of unions to function in ways that maximize workers' power during collective bargaining.

Both bills were given Orwellian names that suggested their purpose was opposite to the bills' provisions. Bill 47, Ensuring Safety and Cutting Red Tape Act, removed most safety guarantees. Joint health and safety committees had been made mandatory for employers with over 20 workers in NDP legislation in 2018. Workers chose their own representative and were involved in regular inspections of workplace safety. The UCP legislation removed workers' rights to choose representatives, giving that right to management, which also no longer had to involve workers in safety inspections that would become less frequent.

Bill 32, the Restoring Balance in Alberta's Workplaces Act, stripped workers of most ways of creating popular support for their demands. It requiring unions to get each member to opt in to pay for all union dues not used for narrowly defined collective bargaining purposes.

NOVEMBER 2022

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AUSTERITY & FIGHTBACK

Led by construction workers, the AFL held a demonstration in 2017 to urge the NDP government to join all other provinces in banning double breasting.

After World War II, public pressures, led by trade unions, gradually produced an implicit contract between governments and citizens to guarantee everyone free public education, a measure of free health care, and guarantees of state aid for children, the aged, and those unable to work. That contract included recognition of trade unions as agents for guaranteeing that the state and employers implemented their responsibilities to ensure fairness in employer-labour relations. In recent decades conservative forces, led by big business, have called for tearing up that contract and making assistance to corporate profit-making endeavours the sole role of the state. Parties like the UCP extol private medical care and private education, and individuals being responsible for themselves whether that is objectively possible or not.

The trade union response has been to fight to re-establish a social democratic contract and to expand it to guarantee justice for all Albertans. That has meant an increasing need to go beyond boardrooms and meeting with government officials to strikes, street demonstrations, and political action.

DECEMBER 2022

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25 Christmas Day	26 Boxing Day	27	28	29	30	31 New Year's Eve



LABOUR'S DEFENCE OF PUBLIC SERVICES

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THE ALBERTA LABOUR HISTORY INSTITUTE WOULD LIKE TO RECOGNIZE
OUR PARTNERS WHO HELP US MAKE THIS CALENDAR POSSIBLE:

Blair Chahley Klassen, Lawyers | Chivers Carpenter, Lawyers | McGown Cook, Barristers & Solicitors
Nugent Law Office | McManus & Hubler, Lawyers | Brenda Kuzio, Lawyer | Severyn Scott, Lawyers

To order additional calendars, contact us at 780.732.0320 or kwlerlin@telus.net