



LABOUR'S STRUGGLES AGAINST PRIVATIZATION

THE ALBERTA LABOUR HISTORY INSTITUTE
2023

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

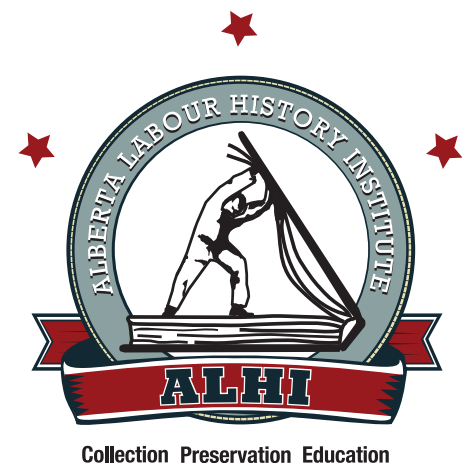
Or perhaps just tell us a story or send us pictures or artifacts you think should be on our website. If you are interested in learning more about ALHI, starting a Chapter in your community, or making a financial contribution to support our work, please email us at office@albertalabourhistory.org

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

You can also contact us at:

ALHI
Suite 603, 12323 Stony Plain Rd NW
Edmonton, AB T5N 3Y5
Ph: (780) 732-0320

Cover Image: Two students join a picket line to support wildcat strikes at Royal Alexandra Hospital, Edmonton, October 26, 2020.



Collection Preservation Education

LABOUR'S STRUGGLES AGAINST PRIVATIZATION

For most of the last 30 years, Alberta has elected conservative governments that have sought to remove public ownership and control over activities that earlier governments, also mainly conservative, had brought into the public sector.

The shift was hardly restricted to Alberta. It was a global capitalist phenomenon where concerns were growing that labour's share of the social pie, both via wages and social wages (the benefits from state programs such as medicare and old-age pensions) was growing at the expense of capital's share. Corporate leaders wanted the state to reduce government programs by privatizing some activities and outsourcing the rest. That would create new avenues for private profit while weakening the trade union movement, which was enjoying more success in organizing public sector workers than private sector workers. From the 1970s, the corporate voices that rejected the "postwar compromise" between labour and capital that gave some recognition to workers' rights to unionize and to benefit from social policies became dominant within most societies.

Informed by pollsters that most citizens mistrusted corporate leaders and their organizations, corporate leaders created organizations that pretended to be grassroots bodies without big business connections. In Canada that included the Fraser Institute (formed in 1974), the National Citizens Coalition (1975), the Canadian Taxpayers Federation (1990), the Frontier Centre for Public Policy (1997), and the Macdonald Laurier Institute (2010). The soft-sounding names evoking independent research groups and citizens' organizations were a ruse; all these organizations are corporate-sponsored non-membership groups. The corporate-owned media reported their propaganda as if it was news. Key politicians such as Stephen Harper, who presided over the National Citizens Coalition from 1998 to 2002, and Jason Kenney, who was president of the Canadian Taxpayers Federation from 1990 (when he was 22 years old) till 1997, and many key political conservative organizers in Canada got their start in big business front organizations.

Labour responded by helping to form real grassroots research and lobbying organizations but could neither match corporate funding for their groups nor get similar corporate media coverage. The agenda that labour was fighting called for reducing public expenditures on services that benefited the whole population and selling off or outsourcing many services. The labour movement denounced the hypocrisy of governments that cut funding and then complained that deteriorating services reflected complacency on the part of public sector workers and needed to be privatized. The unions provided documentation that demonstrated that privatized and outsourced services were of lower quality than the services that public workers had provided. They rarely saved the public any money because the lower wages and benefits that the generally non-unionized private-sector workers received allowed the companies to make big profits as opposed to allowing consumers to pay less. In Alberta privatization and outsourcing began slowly under Peter Lougheed and Don Getty and then became a runaway train under Ralph Klein. There were a few reversals of the privatization trend during the period when the New Democratic Party (NDP) governed Alberta from 2015 to 2019. But the corporate-engineered agenda of privatization resumed with fury under the United Conservative Party (UCP) when it came to power in Alberta in 2019.



THE PRIVATIZATION OF PACIFIC WESTERN AIRLINES, 1974

In 1974, the Peter Lougheed Progressive Conservative government was able to announce a large government surplus thanks to the huge increase in international oil and gas prices announced in late 1973 by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), which also raised the price of Alberta oil and gas. Lougheed wanted to promote the development of industry more broadly in the province and so his government purchased Pacific Western Airlines in 1974 for \$37.5 million and relocated its head office from Richmond, BC to Calgary. But when a global recession hit the Alberta economy in 1982, Lougheed lost much of his reformist zeal. He sold off PWA for \$37.7 million in 1983. PWA carried out a merger with two other airlines in 1987 to create Canadian Airlines International. That company was bought out by Air Canada in 1999. Though West Jet, headquartered in Calgary, began operations in 1996 and became Air Canada's chief competitor, it was bought out by Onex, a Toronto-based company in 2019.

JANUARY 2023

SUN

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1 <small>New Year's Day</small>	2	3	4	5	6	7
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THE PRIVATIZATION OF ALBERTA GOVERNMENT TELEPHONES, 1991

AGT operator at work, 1960
Provincial Archives of Alberta, RP 558.1

Premier Don Getty wanted to reduce his government's debt accumulating from 9 years of low oil prices beginning in 1982. His government had drastically reduced oil and gas royalty rates, and was unwilling to either return them to previous levels or raise corporate taxes, or to join all other provinces in imposing a sales tax. So he chose to sell some government assets. As unions had feared for years, Getty sold Alberta Government Telephones (AGT), the provincial government telephone company that had operated since 1906. By the 1950s AGT was sole telephone service provider for all Alberta outside of Edmonton, which operated its own service. The sale earned the government \$870 million. Telus, the company formed to buy AGT's assets, laid off most of the Alberta-based telephone operators, replacing them with poorly paid workers in underdeveloped countries. Then, in 1999, Telus merged with BC Tel, and relocated its head offices to Richmond, BC. Albertans lost many jobs and a great deal of ongoing revenue to accommodate the short-term thinking of Premier Getty.

FEBRUARY 2023

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THE PRIVATIZATION OF REGISTRY SERVICES, 1993

The Klein government shuttered most government registry service offices in 1993 and contracted with for-profit firms to take over the work. Drivers' licences, motor vehicle licences, marriage licenses, birth certificates, and many other official documents would no longer be processed by government employees, a clear effort to replace a large group of unionized government workers with for-profit firms that paid their workers far less. Driver exams were also privatized. That created a "Wild West kind of system that has not served Albertans well," said NDP Transportation Minister Brian Mason when he announced that all driver exams would be conducted by government workers after March 1, 2019.

In 2020 the UCP government announced its intention to privatize the Land Titles, Personal and Corporate registries. The Alberta Union of Provincial Employees, with 130 of its members' jobs at risk, campaigned against this effort to privatize one of the only registries under direct government supervision. In 2021 the UCP backtracked and indicated that it would not proceed with that privatization.

MARCH 2023

SUN

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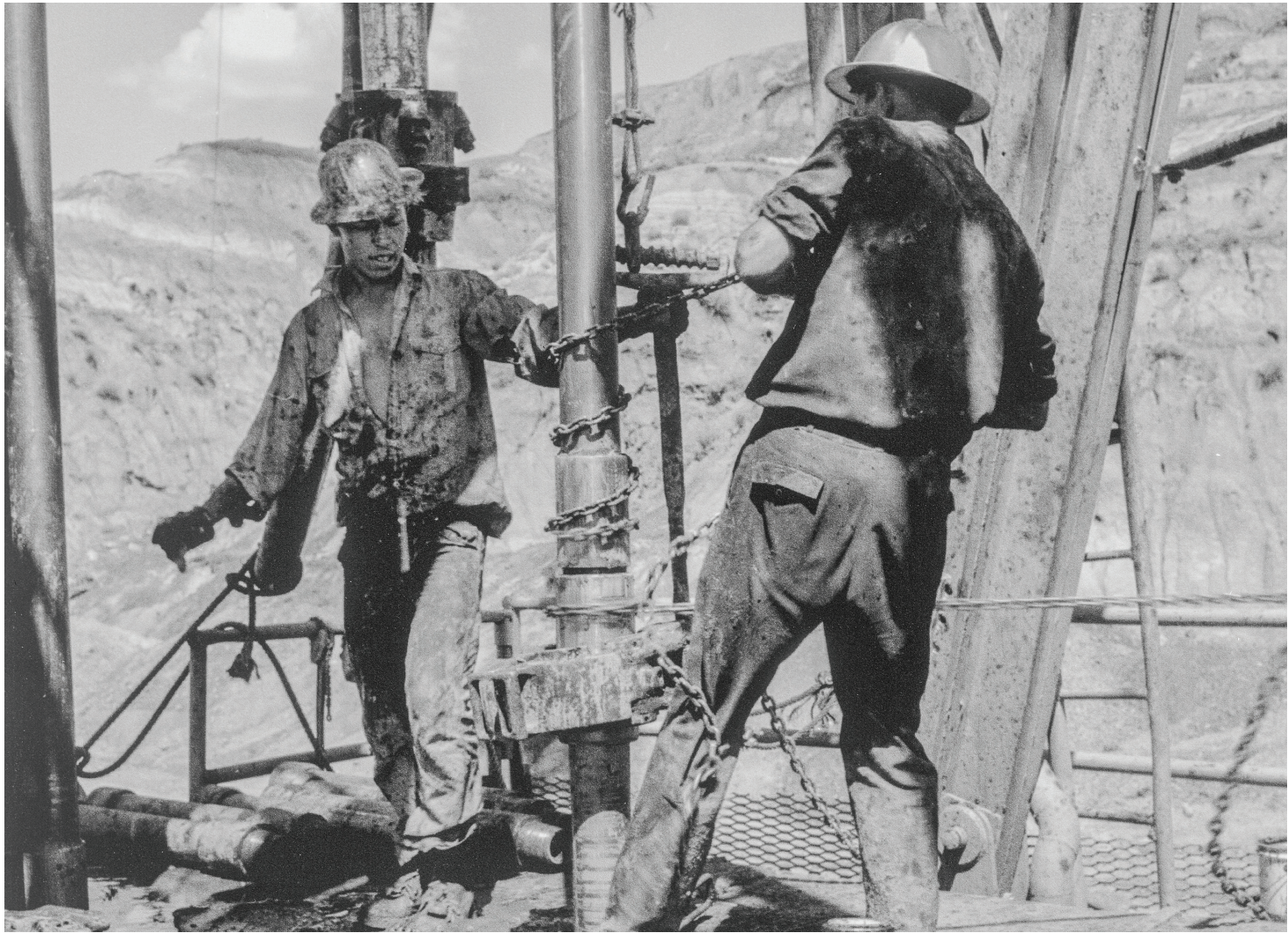
WED

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5	6	7	8 International Women's Day	9	10	11
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THE PRIVATIZATION OF THE ALBERTA ENERGY COMPANY, 1993

Premier Lougheed had established the Alberta Energy Company in 1973 as a 50-50 partnership between the provincial government and Alberta small investors. It was meant to provide Albertans with an opportunity to invest in the province's energy industry while also reducing the province's dependence on foreign investors. It never became a major player in the industry, but it did represent at least a minor effort on the part of the Alberta government to copy other governments in oil-producing regions that were investing in their own resource rather than simply relying on private investors, especially foreigners. The government of Ralph Klein was more completely controlled by foreign oil interests than the Lougheed government, and it sold off the Alberta Energy Company in 1993 for \$273 million.

APRIL 2023

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2	3	4	5	6	7 Good Friday	8
9 Easter Sunday	10 Easter Monday	11	12	13	14	15
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LIQUOR STORE PRIVATIZATION, 1993-1994

In 1915 Albertans voted for prohibition of alcohol sales in a plebiscite. But, as in other provinces, hotels evaded the ban on liquor sales and bootleggers sold as much liquor as beer parlours had earlier sold. In a new plebiscite in 1923, voters chose to remove prohibition in favour of having liquor stores operated by the provincial government and beer parlours that sold liquor purchased from the government. Ralph Klein, hostile to government involvement in retail activities, sold off the government's liquor stores and also allowed new private stores to open. The government liquor store workers were members of the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees, which fought the privatization. Klein said prices would fall because of private competition. But a Parkland Institute study in 2012 showed that Albertans paid more for liquor than people in British Columbia or Saskatchewan. The private retailers paid their workers a fraction of the wages of the former government workers. The savings went to profits, not to lower prices for consumers. No other province has followed the regressive Alberta model.

Pickers belonging to AUPE at Alberta Liquor Control Board (ALCB) store during a strike in 1980

ALHI files

MAY 2023

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	1 International Workers' Day	2	3	4	5	6
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14 Mother's Day	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22 Victoria Day	23	24	25	26	27
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PRIVATIZATION OF CKUA, 1994

CKUA was the first public radio station to operate in Canada. In 1927 the United Farmers of Alberta government agreed to purchase a commercial radio station and turn it into an educational radio station with a mandate to provide intelligent programming as an alternative to the popular hit music and slapstick comedies along with advertising that characterized the rest of radio at the time. Praised over the decades that followed for its eclectic musical offerings and its educational programs, CKUA seemed an abomination to the Klein Conservatives who believed that advertisers should make the decisions about what appeared on the airwaves. Klein gave the new owners all of CKUA's capital assets for ten dollars while giving them \$4.7 million to make the transition from public radio to private radio. Much of that money went to outrageous payments to its new directors and the station was shut down in March 1997 before reappearing six months later as a donor-sponsored station.

A.J. Lazarovich and the Ukrainian Chorus appearing in the CKUA studio in Edmonton in April, 1929.

Provincial Archives of Alberta, A 8371.

JUNE 2023

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Father's Day			National Indigenous Peoples Day			
25	26	27	28	29	30	



PRIVATIZATION OF HOSPITAL LAUNDRY SERVICES, 1995

Public administration is one of the five core principles of the federal universal medicare legislation approved by Parliament in 1966. But the Klein administration was determined to contract out as many hospital services as possible. Important donors to the Progressive Conservative Party wanted the Tory government to let them make profits off services that taxpayers were funding and Klein regarded privatization as having the added benefit of attacking the unions and wages of public sector workers. Laundry workers in Calgary hospitals, fearing privatization, agreed in 1993 to take a 28 percent salary cut. When the Calgary Health Authority nonetheless announced in 1995 that their jobs would be given to K-Bro Linens in Edmonton, 2500 workers in six hospitals and nine nursing homes wildcatted and many unionists called for a general strike to oppose privatizations. Klein offered the unions a delay of 18 months in contracting out the jobs, plus paid retraining and severance payments. The strikers accepted but after considerable divisions on whether to accept or continue to demand permanent jobs.

AUPE and CUPE members celebrate as Klein government blinks in the face of threats of a general strike and extends employment of hospital laundry workers whose work the government was privatizing.

Photo courtesy Gord Christie.

JULY 2023

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						1 <small>Canada Day</small>
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COMMUNITY LABORATORY PRIVATIZATIONS, 1994, 2020

In 1994, the Klein government passed the Regional Health Authorities Act which permitted contracting out of healthcare services to for-profit businesses. Several health authorities contracted out community laboratory services to Dynacare Kasper Medical Laboratories and MDS Kasper which merged to create a private monopoly in the sector. Other health authorities either rejected contracting out of lab services or, after having done so, found the private companies' work inadequate and returned the work to the public sector. In 2016, the NDP government planned a full return to public labs, including construction of a super-lab to consolidate lab test processing in one building. In 2020 the UCP government cancelled the superlab despite construction being well advanced, promising to contract out the entire sector and placing 6000 jobs in limbo. Health Sciences Association of Alberta president Mike Parker countered: "We're recognized as a world leader in the pandemic response because of our public labs and the highly trained professionals who make them run. Selling off labs to private providers just does not make sense and puts profits ahead of health."

Lab workers like this one looking through a microscope would have to work for for-profit employers only, decreed the UCP.
Photo courtesy of Unsplash.

AUGUST 2023

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6	7 Heritage Days	8	9	10	11	12
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DEREGULATION OF ELECTRICITY, 1996

In a closely fought referendum in 1948 on full public operation of the electricity industry in Alberta, only 151 votes kept Calgary Power, a private monopoly for the whole province outside Edmonton, which had public power, in business. Until 1996 the provincial government set electricity rates, essentially awarding the electricity distributors a rate that reflected their costs and a modest profit. Electricity prices in the province were among the lowest in Canada. But the Klein government, believing that market competition could offer improvements for a non-existent problem of electricity rates, made Alberta the only province to deregulate the electricity industry. The government did set a regulated rate for those leery of choosing among the competitors for their business. That rate was set higher than in other provinces to entice Albertans to choose one of the firms offering long-term contracts. Few did, but in 2019, the UCP government abandoned regulated rates. Prices doubled within three years and by 2022, Albertans on average paid \$94 a month more than Quebeckers for electricity and \$60 more than Manitobans.

SEPTEMBER 2023

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3	4 Labour Day	5	6	7	8	9
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PRIVATIZING HEALTH ADMINISTRATION, 2019-

Apart from privatizing community laboratory services, the UCP launched a full-scale attack on public health administration. In 2021, despite severe labour shortages during the pandemic, the UCP announced that 11,000 front line and mostly unionized health care workers would be dismissed so the government could outsource their work to for-profit contractors. Workers in cleaning, food services, protective services, and supply chain and purchasing would be affected along with lab workers and continuing care workers. The UCP had earlier hired Ernst and Young to find areas for privatization in health services, which led to recommendations to privatize existing continuing care services. While the scandalous performance of the private sector in continuing care was exposed during the pandemic, the UCP remained committed to expanding for-profit care. Meanwhile, in 2022, the UCP announced its intention to increase surgeries performed by for-profit operators from 15 percent to 30 percent. Unions representing healthcare workers and the Alberta Federation of Labour have organized opposition to this denigration of public healthcare.

United Nurses of Alberta, among other health care unions, has held a variety of information protests against UCP cutbacks and privatizations.
Photo by David Climenhaga. Courtesy United Nurses of Alberta

OCTOBER 2023

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29	30	31 Halloween				



PRIVATIZING EDUCATION, 2019-

Alberta is the friendliest province in terms of diverting public monies to private schools. The provincial government gives private schools 70 percent per K-12 student of what it gives to public school children. It was 60 percent before being raised to 70 percent in 2008. Five provinces including Ontario give no money to private schools and no other province gives as high as 70 percent. Since the Klein years, Alberta has also given 100 percent funding to charter schools. In 2019, the UCP eliminated the provincial cap on the number of charter schools that can be funded and the need for those schools to be approved and supervised by school boards. In 2022, after several years of brutal cuts to public school boards, the UCP moved \$72 million from public education to allow \$47 million in additional capital costs for charter schools and \$25 million for their operational funds. The Alberta Teachers Association opposed all efforts to weaken public education and to treat education as a commodity rather than a service.

NOVEMBER 2023

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PRIVATIZATION OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING, 2021

In 2021 the UCP government announced that it intended to sell some of its existing 57,000 affordable homes to private companies or non-profit groups. Those units served about 110,000 residents with rents geared to incomes. Though the UCP claimed the funds from the sales would be used to fund new units, housing advocates pointed out that the net result would be a loss of public housing units. For-profit purchasers would not maintain the units sold to them for subsidized housing unless they were given government funds to operate the homes profitably, which would simply deplete the affordable public housing budget. Private sector rentals were geared to profit, not to the income available to renters. A larger public housing stock would moderate private rents which, in turn, would also contribute to reducing the cost of new housing for private sale. Severe reductions in spending on both building new public housing and the maintenance of the existing public housing stock had produced an overall housing crisis.

DECEMBER 2023

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17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24 Christmas Eve	25 Christmas Day	26 Boxing Day	27	28	29	30
31 New Year's Eve						



LABOUR'S DEFENCE OF PUBLIC SERVICES

THE ALBERTA LABOUR HISTORY INSTITUTE
2023

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

Blair Chahley, 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 kwerlin@telus.net