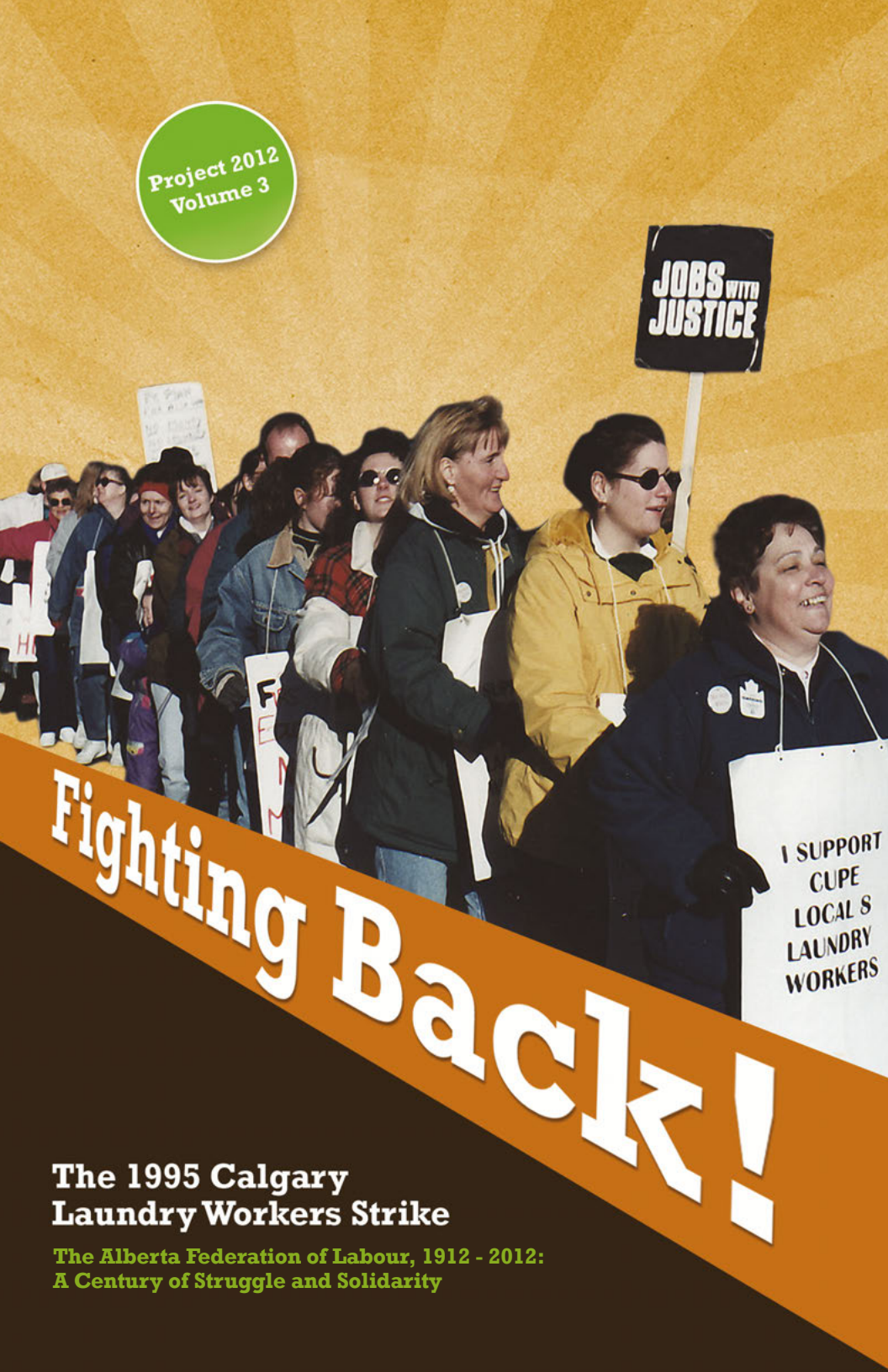


Project 2012
Volume 3

**JOBS WITH
JUSTICE**

A group of laundry workers on strike, holding signs and banners. The workers are dressed in winter clothing, including jackets and hats. They are standing in a line, and some are holding signs. One sign in the foreground reads "I SUPPORT CUPE LOCAL 8 LAUNDRY WORKERS". Another sign in the background reads "JOBS WITH JUSTICE". The background is a textured, light brown wall.

Fighting Back!

The 1995 Calgary Laundry Workers Strike

The Alberta Federation of Labour, 1912 - 2012:
A Century of Struggle and Solidarity



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OF PROVINCIAL ENERGY SERVICES
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STOP

At

Fighting Back

The 1995 Calgary Laundry Workers Strike
By: Allan Chambers

Published by the Alberta Federation of Labour
and the Alberta Labour History Institute
www.project2012.ca

"In all my years in the labour movement, I have never seen a more committed, cohesive or braver group of workers. They were absolutely unshakeable - we were supposed to be the union leaders, but in reality, they were leading us."

Carol Anne Dean, AUPE President, 1995

 Alberta
Federation
of Labour



Layout and Design: Ron Patterson - rapatter@telusplanet.net

Fighting Back





Calgary's hospital laundry workers walked into a cafeteria on November 14, 1995 to hear devastating news. They were about to be fired.

Two years earlier they had accepted deep pay cuts to save their jobs but their sacrifices counted for nothing. The newly created Calgary Health Authority had decided to find contractors who would do dirty laundry for even less money than they earned. On short notice, their managers told them the brutal truth. There would be no money for severance payments although many workers had been on the job for years, even decades. Their employer would deliver nothing more than a blunt goodbye, and a push out the door.

Calgary's health authority anticipated no objections. Why should there be? In the mid-1990s, government cutbacks and job losses were the norm in Alberta. Public service unions were reeling under the onslaught. Laundry workers, like many employees before them, were expected to bow their heads and shuffle away, grateful for the remaining scraps of work that would see them through Christmas.

This time the employer made a colossal miscalculation. Pushed to the edge, the 120 workers at two Calgary laundry operations reached within themselves and found a well of resistance that until then had eluded more powerful union locals and organizations hit hard by Premier Ralph Klein's deficit-slashing government in its first two years in office. The health authority believed laundry workers were pushovers—but the pushovers pushed back.



By the time Calgary's laundry workers were finished, the Conservative government had suffered the first significant loss of the so-called Klein revolution, and the premier himself had been visibly unnerved.

Calgary's laundry workers became unlikely union heroes in an unlikely city. Their numbers included many immigrant women and single mothers—workers whose family finances depended on their meager pay cheques. Their economic grip was so tenuous that they had grudgingly accepted wage rollbacks of up to 28 per cent in the two preceding years.

Those cuts had pushed their average wage below \$9 an hour, plunging many into poverty. It was a far greater sacrifice than the five per cent rollback the Klein government demanded and received from most of its employees. But the laundry workers thought the sacrifice might save their jobs. Their

managers even suggested this possibility, and the workers believed them. When the same managers suddenly announced that the laundry contract would go to an Edmonton firm, K-Bro Linen Systems Ltd., which planned to truck the laundry from Calgary to Edmonton, wash it, and truck it back, the workers were more than bewildered. They were outraged.

Anger does not always bring defiance. The Conservative government's warnings about public deficits and financial ruin had thrown all of Alberta into a state of panic. Premier Klein's attacks on critics and protesters as "victims of the week" and "rent-a-crowds" intimidated many citizens who felt disadvantaged by the government's spending cuts. And in this period of fear and panic, no place was more on the government's side than Calgary, Klein's power base and a city that had rarely exhibited much sympathy or even neutrality towards unions and protests.

If provincial workers took any kind of action in the city, the Klein government might have expected most Calgarians to respond with indifference or outright hostility. You only had to listen to the radio phone-in shows to catch the anti-union mood of the place. And why would Calgarians care about a small group of workers who washed dirty laundry for the hospitals, when the government had already declared that inflated health care spending helped to spark the financial crisis?



Laundry Workers Strike Timeline of Events

All of Alberta was about to find out.

At 5:30 a.m. on a bitterly cold morning—a day after they learned they had lost their jobs—the 60 members of Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 8, who worked in the laundry operation at Calgary General Hospital's Bow Valley Centre, took to the street in a wildcat strike. The next day, Thursday, 60 members of the Alberta Union of Public Employees (AUPE) Local 55, who did the laundry at the Foothills Hospital, joined them. It was an act of defiance uncharacteristic of the workers themselves and also of their unions. In less turbulent times, both had stayed within the close confines of the province's restrictive labour codes.

Many strikers hit the picket line with their hearts in their throats. What in the world were they doing? Few had ever stood on a picket line before, let alone an illegal one. One of their first challenges was to try to work out

where and how to picket. They could face heavy fines, perhaps even jail. They were losing what little income and the small bit of remaining work they had. Under Alberta law, their union could be decertified. What could they possibly hope to gain?

Had anyone told the laundry workers that they were about to reignite a subdued Alberta labour movement and become an inspiration to public sector workers across Canada, they would have shaken their heads in disbelief. Had anyone suggested they would trigger a movement towards a general strike in Alberta hospitals, and beyond, forcing the Klein government to blink and backpedal, they would have scoffed at the idea. And yet the 10-day wildcat strike of the Calgary laundry workers did accomplish this startling and far-reaching response, provincially and nationally. The strike continues to provoke fierce debate in the labour movement, and among the laundry workers themselves, to this day.

Voices From the Picket Line

Yvette Lynch, laundry worker and CUPE 8 member:

"At the beginning of the strike I was scared, thinking, 'How am I going to pay my bills?' But as the days passed, the union assured us that everything was going to work, even if we didn't get everything we asked for. My brothers and nephew and some people I didn't know donated food and money to those of us who really needed help.

"I wanted to show management that just because we are at the bottom, we are not stupid. We have feelings too. Plus I wanted to show my daughter how to stand up for her rights, even if she ends up being a single parent like her Mom."

(Working TV)

1983

Alberta outlaws strikes by hospital workers after three nurses' strikes between 1977 and 1982.

1988

Nurses strike against wage rollback and are fined over \$450,000.

Fifteen years later, intriguing questions linger. Did organized labour, after shaking off its mood of despair at the spending cuts and rushing to support the laundry workers, accept an end to the strike prematurely? With the Klein government retreating at the prospect of a province-wide revolt, was there an opportunity for other working people in Alberta to recover some lost ground? Or were the labour leaders right in calculating that the laundry workers had played their strongest hand, successfully negotiated a limited reprieve, and should now return to work?

We'll Walk!

The critical fact of the strike, and much of its significance, was that the laundry workers led it. This time union leaders had to catch up to their members.

Union officials from the start were unanimous in stating their admiration for the workers, who had ignored their warnings about the hazards of an illegal strike and chose instead to assert whatever power they had—even if it was only the power to protest. Humiliated by their abrupt dismissal and lost jobs, they chose to fight back with evident courage. The workers led the strike action, articulating their anger and their aims themselves, and their leaders had no choice but to follow in their wake.



Susan Keeley was a long-time labour activist in Calgary and a service representative with CUPE Local 8. She was one of the service reps summoned by hospital management for the abrupt cafeteria announcement to laundry workers that their jobs had been privatized. In later interviews with the Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI), she recalled the details of that day.

“The employer called all the laundry workers in and told them they were going to get two weeks notice,” she said. “They would get the two weeks notice or pay in lieu, and thank you very much, but goodbye. So people were just a tad upset.”

1993

Ralph Klein and Conservatives win election on promise to cut spending and wipe out debt.

1993

Calgary General Hospital managers seek pay cuts of five per cent from most workers, and 28 per cent from laundry workers. Workers accept to keep their jobs.



Laundry workers support call for a walkout (Photo G.Christie)

Laundry worker Edna McMullan described how it felt to be told her job was gone. “Sitting in that room was just horrible,” she said. “Everybody was so upset. Then they told us that we’d all be let go and that there was a little tiny budget saved aside for counseling—something like that. It was nothing. It was a slap in the face.”

“They thought we would just go back to work for the day. It’s kind of funny. They thought we’d just go back and finish. When the hospital board representative left, however, our union reps stayed and talked with us, and we said, ‘We’ll walk.’ It was great, because no one suspected anything. They thought we’d just roll over and take it.”

On their reps’ advice, the workers went home sick for the day, but agreed to meet that night to decide if there was anything they could do. Their anger overflowed that evening. At the meeting, which drew nearly all the CUPE laundry workers, union reps suggested an information picket, but the workers quickly over-rode them.

“Several of the members got up,” Susan Keeley said. “One in particular, Yvette Lynch, got up and said, ‘I’m a single mom with two kids, but I say an information picket isn’t enough. We’re outta here.’ So the decision was not to go with the information picket but to go with a full-blown walkout the next morning. It was their decision and it was unanimous.”

“So at 5:30 the next morning we were on the picket line in front of the laundry. It was probably one of the most exciting times I’ve been through as far as watching the members stand up for themselves and grow stronger every day.”

The workers had lived for years with job and pay uncertainty. They said they felt liberated about their decision to fight back. Lilia Blasetti, a CUPE Local 8 member, described for *Working TV* the high emotions on the picket line as the wildcat strike began. Union members worried about what might happen, but they also felt elated

Tuesday, Nov. 14, 1995

Laundry workers told their jobs have been contracted out.

Tuesday night, Nov. 14

CUPE laundry workers vote for wildcat strike.



that laundry workers who had lost so much were finally beginning to resist. “I don’t think I could even describe the feeling, watching everybody just come out,” she said. “You could hear cheering. People were just so excited. They were finally saying that enough is enough, and they were not afraid to do it. I just sat there and watched everybody come out and wave. It was the greatest feeling.”

At first the strike mystified the hospital managers. “I think management was amused the first couple of days,” said Edna McMullan. “They used to go up on the roof and watch us. I don’t think they thought it would last very long, or that it would have that big an

effect. After a few days, though, they stopped watching.”

Instead, the health authority resorted to more traditional strike-fighting measures. Managers sent photographers to take pictures of the strikers, recalled Dave Werlin, who was regional director for CUPE at the time, and had formerly been a representative for Local 8. These pictures quickly became part of the applications the Calgary Health Authority filed with the Alberta Labour Relations Board for cease and desist orders. The board granted the requests and issued their orders to stop the labour action.

The strikers ignored the order. Daily events began to move beyond the control of the health authority, the labour relations board, and the provincial government. Laundry pickets saw that they could reach many more people by crossing a field from their worksite and picketing along Memorial Drive, a busy commuter route. From the very start of the strike action, through their car windows, Calgarians witnessed the courage of a small group of underpaid

Voices From the Picket Line

Cindy Pendon, laundry worker and CUPE 8 member:

“We’re all little people – laundry staff – and we were the first ones to stand up to the big guys. We didn’t care if it was illegal to go on strike. We’re out of a job anyway, so we didn’t have anything to lose. Everybody felt the same way. It’s the final straw and, if we’re going to lose our job, we’re going to lose it, but we have to do something before we lose it. We were surprised to get all this support from everybody, from the whole country.”

(Working TV)

Wednesday, Nov. 15

AUPE laundry staff vote to join strike.

Thursday, Nov. 16

Labour Relations Board orders end to illegal strike.



Young strike supporter sends message to the premier (Photo G.Christie)

laundry workers who were about to lose their jobs at the hands of a powerful new health authority.

Many people in Calgary decided it was unfair, even offensive, to treat the city's most vulnerable workers in this manner. They began to respond. Car horns sounded along Memorial Drive, music to the strikers' ears. The media arrived and quickly pieced together a story of injustice. It was obvious to most people that whatever the problems of the health care system, they were not going to be solved by trampling on the least powerful workers in that system—or, for that matter, by killing Calgary jobs and trucking laundry all the way to Edmonton for soapsuds. Calgarians took to the talk-show phone lines—not to

berate strikers, but to demand they be treated better.

“The honking and everything and the support was overwhelming,” said Len Fagnan, the president of CUPE Local 8. He had been involved in numerous Calgary strikes, but never one where public support was so enthusiastic. “A lot of the support was because the laundry was a small part of the health care system, yet it's the one that said to the Calgary Regional Health Authority, that's enough.” Calgarians were upset to hear that the Calgary board had hired an Edmonton company. “They were quite indignant about that,” Fagnan said. “They were quite insulted that we didn't have the ability (to do the laundry).”

Friday, Nov. 17

Support workers walk off job at other Calgary hospitals, except for Children's Hospital. Premier Klein calls for delay in contracting out. AFL calls for labour support on picket line.

Saturday, Nov. 18

Picket line swells as organized labour joins protest. Hospitals cancel elective surgery.

The laundry workers' bravery galvanized organized labour in the city. Within a day, workers in areas such as hospital housekeeping and cafeteria services—also prime targets for privatization—walked out in sympathy. Support workers from other Calgary hospitals joined the picket line, and workers walked off the job at several nursing and extended care homes. All of these employees had taken pay cuts, agreed to contract concessions, accepted additional work in the staggering health care system, and knew they probably faced the same fate as the laundry workers. The Calgary Health Authority, previously oblivious to the worry and ferment among its most vulnerable employees, suddenly confronted deep resentment that had been building among health care workers.

Labour leaders sensed that the laundry workers had inspired other workers and members of the public to speak their minds. They threw their forces into the fray.

“Workers know when people are being unfairly picked on,” Dave Werlin said in an interview with ALHI. He compared the situation of the laundry workers to the plight of workers at the Gainers meatpacking plant of Edmonton businessman Peter Pocklington in the 1980s. The meatpackers were also promised job security in exchange for wage cuts and felt cheated when the promises evaporat-

ed into thin air. “It arouses a special resentment,” Werlin said.

The Alberta Federation of Labour and the public service unions sent representatives to Calgary to join the picket line. They went to work in other centres to build support for the strike. By the end of the first week, unionized workers from five Calgary hospitals, excluding the children's hospital, had joined the laundry workers on the picket line. Four days into the fight, the picket line swelled with supporters from across the city and beyond, and the strike dominated the news in Calgary.

Jim Selby, the communications director for the AFL, witnessed the strike firsthand while preparing stories for an edition of *Labour News*. The courage of the laundry workers moved him.

“We're talking about a largely female work force and a large proportion of them were immigrant women,” he said in an ALHI interview. “For them to take on an illegal job action is incredibly impressive because of their insecure position in society to start with. The first fight-back to the Klein agenda of public service destruction and cutbacks came from the most vulnerable members of the public service work force.”

The AFL made plans for a broader strike, perhaps even a general strike involving the public and private sec-



Sunday, Nov. 19

Calgary Regional Health Authority offers severance and amnesty from penalties. CUPE and AUPE workers reject offer. Walkout expands to other support workers in hospitals and care facilities.



Union activists join the picket: Dave Werlin, Susan Keeley, and Bill Paterson (Photo G.Christie)

tors. In Edmonton, machinists voted to strike in sympathy. AUPE members in Edmonton met to consider how to support the Calgary strikers and to protect their own jobs from being privatized. In Lethbridge, laundry workers walked off the job for a day in support. Calgary's nurses, along with other health care workers represented by the Health Sciences Association and the Canadian Health Care Guild, voted to work to rule, meaning they would do none of the strikers' work,

although they drew back from joining an illegal strike.

Many Calgary doctors publicly sympathized with the laundry workers, describing the strike as a symptom of the stresses within a health care system reeling from spending cuts and job losses. Several doctors made picket line appearances, underlining the degree of worry throughout the system about the impact of the cuts on the health care of Albertans.

Monday, Nov. 20

Labour board orders end to wider strike at health authority's request.

Tuesday, Nov. 21

Labour Minister Stockwell Day joins talks in Calgary. Calgary nurses vote to work to rule, but don't join strike. AUPE members at Glenrose and University hospitals in Edmonton demand end to contracting out of their jobs.

The provincial government was rattled. Cabinet ministers who had been alarming citizens with threats of a fiscal Armageddon suddenly felt the ground move beneath their own feet. Three days into the strike, the situation had escalated so rapidly that Premier Klein made his first foray into the dispute, suggesting it might be a good idea to delay awarding the K-Bro contract for six months. His remark made no impression on the strike, however, beyond indicating that the laundry workers and their supporters had the government's attention.

Picket lines grew through the weekend and the hospitals were forced to cancel elective surgeries and other non-emergency services. Belatedly, the health authority offered to sit down to talk. A meeting was arranged with union negotiators at the

Holy Cross Hospital on Sunday, the fifth day of the strike. Union supporters rallied outside. Inside the meeting room, the authority offered severance up to 52 weeks to departing employees and said it would not seek penalties for workers who had gone on strike or picketed. It said, however, that it still favoured contracting out the laundry jobs. The two striking locals rejected the offer.

In response, the Calgary Health Authority went back to Alberta's labour relations board for another cease and desist order, paving the way for fines and other penalties. The strike, however, was now beyond the control of the employer or the board. By Monday, the conflict was drawing national attention, particularly from Ontario where public service unions braced for a winter of battles with the Conservative government of Premier Mike Harris, an admirer of the Klein government who had already earned the nickname "Bomber Harris" for his attacks on public services.



Projectionists from IATSE 302 show their solidarity (Photo G.Christie)

Wednesday, Nov. 22

Government announces that \$53 million of \$124 million in health cuts won't go ahead. Workers represented by Health Sciences Association of Alberta and Canadian Health Care Guild vote to work to rule, but not to join strike.

Thursday, Nov. 23

AUPE workers at two Edmonton hospitals vote to strike the next day if contracting out is not ended. Top labour leaders join talks with health authority in Calgary.

Voices From the Picket Line

Susan Keeley, service rep for CUPE 8 and picket line liaison with police during the strike:

“I had a choice of going in to the bargaining table or staying out on the line. I felt that I was better used on the picket line maintaining support and making sure everything worked well.

“The settlement wasn’t what the members wanted. There were a lot of tears and frustration. But I think everyone in the end realized that because we had reached the pinnacle and we were starting to see a down slope on support, not a major one but it was starting, we were starting to hear negative things that maybe we had gone as far as we could. Our members did realize that they could stand up and walk back to work with dignity, that they did save their jobs for two years.”

(ALHI interview)

In Edmonton, AUPE bargaining units at the Glenrose Hospital and University of Alberta Hospital voted to support the Calgary strikers, and to take whatever action was necessary, including a walkout, to block further contracting out of their work. Edmonton workers had already lost laundry services to K-Bro a year earlier, and were acutely aware that the Capital Health Authority was on the lookout for more services to contract out. The AUPE locals at the Edmonton hospitals set a deadline for the following Friday, saying they would walk off the job if the Calgary strike and their own concerns were not resolved.

An atmosphere of crisis began to settle over the health care system, drawing the attention of top-level politicians and labour leaders. CUPE national president Judy Darcy flew to Calgary and entered the negotiations. Labour Minister Stockwell Day was already involved and Premier Klein would soon play a role.

Exactly a week after the strike began, Health Minister Shirley McClellan suddenly announced the government had cancelled health spending cuts of \$53 million from the \$123 million in cuts budgeted for the year. Alberta would also put more money into home care, she promised. Klein declared it was time to re-evaluate the health care restructuring, but he insisted this review had nothing to do with the strike. Newspapers saw it differently, however, and announced on their front pages that Klein had “blinked.” Blinking was something the premier had vowed never to do.

Talk of a general strike was in the air, but senior labour leaders accepted an invitation from the health authority to resume negotiations. CUPE’s national leader, Judy Darcy, took a direct role. So did CUPE Alberta president Terry Mutton and AUPE president Carol Anne Dean. AFL president Audrey Cormack was prominent on the picket lines and in efforts to broaden the

Friday, Nov. 24

Both sides announce tentative deal after all-night talks. Edmonton hospital workers call off strike plans. Calgary laundry workers vote to accept.

Saturday, Nov. 25

Calgary strikers return to work.



strike beyond the hospital workers. By now, 2,700 hospital support workers in Calgary had walked off the job and the situation of the hospitals was critical. In Edmonton, up to 3,000 support workers were on the verge of an illegal strike that would have plunged Alberta into a hospital emergency.

After a marathon overnight session, the negotiators announced a tentative agreement. It contained some new terms but was essentially the same as the agreement rejected by the striking locals

a week earlier. Laundry workers would be guaranteed job security for a year, and severance payments if their work was later contracted out. No penalties would be sought against those who engaged in the illegal strike or joined the picket line. The health authority refused to accept a ban on contracting out the work itself. Premier Klein said the guarantee of severance pay would apply to all provincial workers whose jobs were contracted out, representing a gain by the laundry workers on behalf of all provincial employees.

A Victory and a Loss?

The Calgary laundry workers strike, and the public support for it, surprised many Canadians, including members of the Calgary Health Authority and the Alberta government. In retrospect, the firm action should not have been surprising.

After 1994, the Conservative government pursued deep, sudden and seemingly permanent cuts to spending on public services. It defended the cuts as necessary to bring the budget deficit under control. The government argued that it had a mandate to cut services because of its victory in the 1993 election on a platform of doing whatever it took to wipe out the provincial debt. There was no room for debate. Critics were fiercely attacked.

Cuts to health care hit Albertans in a way that many other spending reductions did not. When welfare rolls were slashed in half, Premier Klein dismissed the few complaints as coming from “special interests.” When the government stopped policing areas like pollution by companies, letting the companies watch themselves, few citizens objected. Even education cuts drew few complaints outside the education establishment. But many Albertans felt themselves to be directly affected by the cuts to hospital and nursing care.

The Klein government cut nearly \$600 million out of the health care system in three years, a 20 per cent reduction.



Housekeeping workers walk out in support (Photo G.Christie)

Labour negotiators urged the strikers to accept the offer. The workers did so at meetings that afternoon, although many were upset with the terms. In Edmonton, AUPE members who were about to walk off their jobs at two hospitals, and were even lining up to begin their strike, were told literally at the last minute to call off their plans because of the Calgary settlement. By 5:30 a.m. on Saturday morning, Calgary's striking health support staff had returned to work.

By 1995, just about everybody in Alberta knew someone who had been affected by the health cuts, whether through a pay cut, a lost job, or reduced services. The cuts led directly to hospital bed shortages, emergency ward lineups and documented stories of critically ill patients in ambulances sent from one hospital to another by overburdened emergency staff—or sent home to family without necessary home care in place.

Albertans were worried about the health care system, and government members magnified the anxiety by repeating their mantra that the private sector could do things better. Conservative governments in Alberta, from Social Credit onwards, had only grudgingly accepted public medicare. Was the Klein government prepared to gut it completely so the private sector could move in? When the laundry workers walked out and other health care workers followed, the strikers hit a painful nerve with the public. Many Albertans identified with the strikers.

Organized labour recognized the importance of the strike. Alberta's public sector unions had fought pitched battles against privatization schemes and public service cuts since the 1980s when the Conservative government

of Premier Don Getty first declared a spending crisis. Labour leaders had expected more of the same from Klein, but they were knocked off balance in the first year, like much of Alberta, by draconian cuts that were immediate and non-negotiable.

By 1995, many public service workers felt their only option was the one shown by the laundry workers: dig in your heels and push back. By directly challenging the power of their managers and the Alberta government, the Calgary laundry workers became a beacon to other workers and unions that felt they had surrendered everything they could, with backs to the wall, and had no remaining choice but resistance.

Canadians woke up to the significance of the strike in Calgary. By the time the laundry strike was a week old, the Canadian Labour Congress and union locals as far away as Newfoundland had pledged active support. Judy Darcy of CUPE described the strike as the first push by workers against health care cuts that were being trotted out by conservative governments across Canada. "They (the laundry workers) will give heart to workers across the country," she said.

Voices From the Picket Line

Sean McManus, AUPE regional director in Calgary in 1995:

"To a person they (laundry workers) decided they weren't going to take it anymore. None of this would have happened if the members themselves didn't decide to do it, because we (union leaders) were truly the followers. The union officials and staff and everyone else had to catch up because they (workers) were on the picket line."

(ALHI interview)



Concerned Calgarians join the picket as support for the strike snowballs (Photo G.Christie)

And yet, for all this support, the national and provincial labour leaders who took an active part in the negotiations agreed to a settlement that bought some time and minimal security for the workers—but not much else. The laundry workers accepted the agreement at the urging of their representatives, but approval was far from unanimous and some of the strikers remained upset and angry.

One question hung stubbornly in the air, even as the workers returned to work. Did union leaders, negotiating in a marathon session with high-

ranking government members, accept a settlement too soon?

With the government off balance, was this the time to push for more guarantees against contracting out? Could some wage cuts have been reversed? Could labour have done more to derail the government's privatization agenda if its leaders had decided to broaden the laundry workers' revolt, rather than cut it off?

Those who negotiated on behalf of the strikers argued that resolve had begun to weaken on the picket line among



The picket line becomes conga line as laundry workers and supporters dance in the street. (Photo G.Christie)

workers who wanted their jobs back, and that public support in Calgary was melting as people started to focus on the threat to health care. Polls suggested public support was waning. Rather than risk an unpopular wider strike, it was time to settle and prepare to fight another day.

To this day, Susan Keeley is unable to give a definitive answer. She remembers the tears and frustration of strikers, and their feeling of being betrayed by their top leadership. But she also remembers the fateful decision by Calgary nurses not to join the strike. The nurses in the 1980s had challenged the Getty government by

striking and had been hit with heavy fines and even more restrictive legislation. They were understandably not eager to enter an illegal general strike in 1995, but their decision was a blow to the laundry workers. “While we had the support of a lot of the workers, quite honestly having the nurses say no really did deflate a lot of the enthusiasm,” Keeley recalled.

Laundry workers couldn’t help but be disappointed, she said. “But I think everyone in the end realized that because we had reached the pinnacle and we were starting to see a down-slope in support . . . that maybe we had gone as far as we could.”

Recollecting the strike in an interview with ALHI researchers, Keeley spoke eloquently of the mixed feelings of the workers.

“The morning that they did go back, we (Local 8 reps) went in with them, went in singing. The people went in with their heads held high, which was important. But we were looking at it at that point as possibly building to a general strike, which could have changed the face of this province for a long time.”

Labour activists Tom Fuller and Patricia Hughes-Fuller, writing in 2005, looked back at the decision by both sides, government and labour, to pull back from a general strike and concluded that each feared the consequences of further brinkmanship. “General strikes are inherently volatile,” they wrote, “and the stakes for strikers and government alike are very high.” Every general strike carries “a hint of insurrection” and neither side was prepared to deal with unknown consequences.

The laundry workers could claim a victory on behalf of all health care workers and the public. Their strike encouraged others to fight the government’s plans to expand private health care. A public campaign by Friends of Medicare persuaded the government to drop its support for a bizarre proposal by some investors and Edmonton doctors to set up a private “Hotel de Health” catering to wealthy, ailing Americans. The Medi-

care supporters also campaigned successfully to limit the scope of Bill 11, another government bill to expand private health care.

The laundry workers themselves, however, won only a limited victory. Two years later, the Calgary health authority leased the Bow Valley Centre laundry facility to K-Bro Linen Systems, which agreed to do the laundry in Calgary instead of Edmonton. Still, Premier Klein freely acknowledged to journalists that 1995 was difficult. “This year was a particularly tough year because we hit the wall with health and we had to pull back,” he said in a year-end interview. The time had come, he said, to begin “re-investing” in public health care.

For that, Albertans owed a large debt to a small but courageous group of underpaid support workers who decided to stand up for themselves by defying powerful authorities in the province’s richest city.

Nadiya Jina was one of those workers. She came to Canada from Tanzania and worked at the Foothills Hospital laundry for two years before the strike. When the walkout began, she had little concept of a strike, legal or illegal, or what it meant. By the end of the strike, she did. “After having the strike, we came to know each other more, and our friendship is stronger,” she said. “We never knew what a union was before. It’s from the strike that I got to know what power a union has.”



What Was the Significance of the Strike?

Was it a mistake to settle after 10 days? Several union officials directly involved in the conflict gave their opinions 15 years later in a round-table discussion for ALHI led by long-time labour activist Winston Gereluk.

Dave Werlin, CUPE
former regional director:

“The significance (of the strike) was that it was a missed opportunity. If Klein blinked, it was an opportunity to keep pressing on. Think of how much bigger it might have been.”

Winston Gereluk, AUPE
former communications director:

“The strike resulted in a whole turnaround in the province. It was as if the laundry workers told the other unions what they should be doing.”



**Tom Fuller, AUPE
researcher and writer:**

“It was a watershed in terms of the Klein government. It continued to privatize after the strike, but it was not as confident as in the past. The government lost its ideological fervour and vigour. And it changed the mood in the union movement from one of desperate, last-ditch, go down swinging, to one of confidence, optimism – but don’t overstate things.

“Also, the laundry workers brought together the unease and unhappiness with the Klein government. Conservative Calgary decided that public health care was important.”

**Jim Selby, AFL
former communications director:**

“Among workers, there was a deep-seated anger with the Klein agenda. On the picket line, two of every three cars were waving, honking. There had been a fatalistic acceptance of the Klein agenda, but people were angry and discontented and this gave them a chance to show it. In that sense, the strike was a flashpoint.”

RESOURCES

Books

Trevor W. Harrison (editor): The return of the Trojan Horse, Alberta and the New World (dis)Order, Black Rose Books (2005)

Mark Lisac: Alberta Politics Uncovered, Taking back our Province, NeWest Press (2004)

Linda Goyette, Second Opinion, The best of Linda Goyette, Rowan Books (2005)

Articles

Anne McGrath and Dean Neu: "Washing our blues away," Our Times (March/April 1996)

Gordon M. Christie: "Dirty Laundry," Briarpatch (February 1996)

Gil McGowan: "Calgary hospital workers stage dramatic wildcat strike," Labour News (December 1995)

Winston Gereluk: "Edmonton hospital workers mobilize," Labour News (December 1995)

Jim Selby: "The tide is turning on cuts," Labour News (December 1995)

Linda Goyette: "Ralph Klein would never tell a lie. True or false?" in Second Opinion, the best of Linda Goyette, Rowan Books (1998)

Tom Fuller and Patricia Hughes-Fuller: "Exceptional measures: Public Sector Labour Relations in Alberta" in The Return of the Trojan Horse, Alberta and the new world (dis)order, edited by Trevor W. Harrison, Black Rose Books (2005)

Allan Chambers: “Revolutions back to back: In big industrial Ontario, public employees are finding inspiration in a little strike in Alberta that caused Premier Ralph Klein to blink” (Edmonton Journal, April 6, 1996)

Transcripts

Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI) oral history interviews, available online at www.labourhistory.ca or by contacting ALHI: Len Fagnan, Gordon Christie, Clancy Teslenko, Susan Keeley, Collette Singh.

ALHI interview on video with Sean McManus, and a group discussion on video of strike participants and analysts Winston Gereluk, Dave Werlin, Jim Selby and Tom Fuller.

Interviews with Calgary laundry workers supplied by ‘working TV’ for an article in Our Times by Anne McGrath and Dean Neu. The interview subjects were Lilia Blasetti, Yvette Lynch, Nadiya Jina, Edna McMullan and Cindy Pendun.

Newspapers

Alberta’s major newspapers carried daily reports of the strike, often supplied by Calgary Herald reporters, and some analysis. See for example: Kim Lunman: “Walkout a symbol of the times” (Calgary Herald, Nov. 21, 1995); Dave Pommer: “Dirty laundry helps to define labour history (Calgary Herald, Nov. 26, 1995); and Tom Arnold and Marta Gold: “‘We hit the wall,’ health care concerns forced a halt in the Klein revolution, switch to reinvestment” (Edmonton Journal, Dec. 30. 1995)

Photo Resources

**Photos courtesy Gord Christie.
Editorial Cartoon courtesy Alberta Federation of Labour.**



THE ALBERTA LAND
OF PROVINCIAL
grounds Maint.
NEXT
is?
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I SUPPORT
CUPE
LOCAL 8
LAUNDRY
WORKERS

P.E.
SUPPORTS
THIS
RUGGLE

Project 2012 is a joint project of the Alberta Federation of Labour and the Alberta Labour History Institute. The project will produce materials which celebrate the AFL's 100th anniversary in 2012, and will record the history of working Albertans.



Labour News

Alberta's Alternate News Voice

December 1995

Vol. 2, No. 9

Calgary hospital workers stage dramatic wildcat strike

by Gil McGowan, AFL Staff

The mouse that roared. That's how some people are describing the 120 hospital laundry workers who led a massive wildcat strike in Calgary between November 14th and 24th. At the peak of the strike, more than 2,700 workers from six hospitals and nine nursing homes walked off the job to protest the Calgary Regional Health Authority's decision to privatize laundry services.

The strike paralyzed all of Calgary's hospitals — non-emergency procedures had to be cancelled for several days. But despite the disruption in service, public opinion remained firmly behind the strikers.

Photo Credit: Rosemarie Sargent



awarded to the lowest bidder.

Researchers from the two unions representing laundry workers — ALPE and CUPE — discovered that K-Firo submitted the highest bid. The company would have charged \$56 million over five years to handle laundry from Calgary hospitals. That's \$8 million more than it would cost to keep the service "in-house."

As word of the privatization decision spread, the strike escalated quickly. Two days after the walkout began, Calgary's 120 hospital laundry workers were joined on the picket line by hundreds of other workers.

Cafeteria, housekeeping and

tracing-out.

The ranks of striking workers swelled even further on November 23, when several hundred lab technologists — members of the Health Sciences Association — joined the strike. Additional support came from the United Nurses of Alberta and the Staff Nurses Association who both launched "work-to-rule campaigns".

And support was not restricted to Calgary. Rallies, demonstrations and information packets were organized outside hospitals in Edmonton, Lethbridge, Red Deer, Grande Prairie and several smaller communities.

