Pandemic inequality: Premier Higgs attempts to squeeze money from unionized front-line public sector workers while billionaire wealth rises

By SUSAN O’DONNELL

During the pandemic, New Brunswick Premier Blaine Higgs is trying to squeeze income from front-line public sector workers while at the same time, the most wealthy people in the province are increasing their fortunes dramatically.

More than 13,000 hospital workers and educational support workers, as well as other workers in New Brunswick represented by CUPE, the largest public sector union in the province, have contracts in various stages of negotiations.

During his Dec. 11 meeting with CUPE leaders, Higgs confirmed that the government’s wage offer at the bargaining table will be a three per cent increase in wages over a contract of four years: zero (a wage freeze) in the first year, and one percent in each of the remaining three years.

In November, the Canadian Centre for Tax Fairness published a report showing that Canada’s billionaires are doing very well during the pandemic, particularly over the past six months this year.

Among the billionaires listed in the report are two from New Brunswick. Between April and October this year, the wealth of James Irving, owner of JD Irving, rose 32 per cent, from $3.3 billion to $4.4 billion over the past six months.

The report revealed that while Canada’s wealthiest billionaires became even wealthier during the pandemic, “millions of ordinary Canadians and small businesses have struggled to survive. “

Theresa McAlister represents CUPE’s 3,900 Educational Support Staff. Her members are in negotiations, have a report from a conciliator, and are looking to return to the bargaining table. She said Robinson’s comments apply also to educational workers. “They are exhausted, mentally, and physically.”

McAlister said that before the pandemic, Premier Higgs was always “expecting us to do more with less.” Now, during the pandemic, educational support staff have even more duties and tasks, despite being paid for the same amount of hours.

In March this year, the NB Media Co-op reported how the provincial and regional governments in New Brunswick were using the COVID-19 crisis to undermine CUPE members in New Brunswick. New Brunswick’s wages and decreases the gap between rich and poor is to have a high number of unionized workers. Unions reduce inequality and protect the ability of workers on low and middle wages to obtain a fair share of economic growth.

The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) represents more than 28,000 workers in New Brunswick and is the largest public sector union in Canada.

Susan O’Donnell is a reporter with the NB Media Co-op.

A custodial worker. Photo from CUPE NB.

New Brunswick needs rental reform—and fast

By MATTHEW HAYES

Moncton Mayor Dawn Arnold sounded giddy. “We have $270 million plus in new building permits,” she told the Telegraph Journal reported Dec. 24 that net interprovincial migration to New Brunswick is only about 1,000 for this year, not a significant change over the last several years. International immigration is way down.

There is another explanation: the growth of single-person households. This is now the most common household form in Canada as of the 2016 census. Single-person households are more likely to rent than other household forms.

In the 1991 census, New Brunswick had 272,915 dwellings, and an average household size of 2.8 people. Today, there are more private dwellings (319,770 in 2016) but also smaller household sizes (2.3), meaning the overall availability of dwellings has declined. This is the main reason for housing crisis, a problem that was acknowledged by the McKenna government back in 1995 (see pp. 22-23).

On top of these demographic changes, there are also socio-economic ones. Since the early 1980s, income and wealth inequality in Canada has grown substantially.

The sudden surge in interest amongst property investors in New Brunswick’s multi-family residential sector is pushing up housing prices and spreading lower income tenants.

The coronavirus crisis has made this inequality even worse. Record levels of unemployment and surging real estate prices have led to a national housing affordability crisis that is now spreading beyond Toronto and Vancouver.

New Brunswick’s housing market was relatively affordable compared to the rest of Canada, but the province also has higher levels of unemployment, lower labour market participation and higher levels of unemployment, lower labour market participation.

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Apartment buildings in Fredericton. Photo by Matthew Hayers.

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Maritime Bus plans to cut routes in New Brunswick due to the province’s refusal to grant subsidies to the struggling company but says they will delay the cuts by two weeks to allow time for affected communities to come up with a temporary bail out plan for the company. The cuts were supposed to come in effect on January 15.

The reduced service primarily affects francophone northern parts of the province, which rejected Blaine Higgs’ Conservative agenda in last fall’s election. Higgs has no representation north of the Miramichi River, and now, New Brunswick could have no bus service there either.

The announcement angered members of the public and other political parties. According to New Brunswick Green Party Leader David Coon, funds coming to the Province from the federal carbon tax would give Premier Higgs a second chance to sign a deal to keep the buses running to northern New Brunswick. It would also give the government time to plan for a long-term solution to extend public transportation services to more New Brunswickers.

“I am baffled by the Premier’s indifference to those New Brunswickers who depend on public transportation to connect with healthcare services, school or work. What does he see the role of government if not to support its people?” said Coon.

For Coon, “It is just wrong to leave people living in the northern half of the province stranded without public transportation services. It is blatantly discriminatory,” said Coon.

Maritime Bus reached out to the provincial governments in the Maritimes, requesting all three provinces co-share transportation services. It is blatantly discriminatory,” said Coon.

Jessi Taylor, spokesperson for Reproductive Justice NB, is concerned about how the axed bus routes will affect access to abortion services in a province that “refuses to fund abortion services in community settings.”

“When you piece by piece, or go out of province, abortion services are only available in two regions of the province. Moncton and Bathurst. If you live in any of these two regions, you often have to travel more than once because you have to come for two different appointments and definitely not on the same day and the next day. So you have to either pay out of pocket to stay in town or you have to travel,” said Taylor.

To address inadequate transportation services in the province, Coon wants to see the “Premier mandate the Minister of Transportation to implement the public transportation strategy commissioned by the government five years ago.”

In 2015, the New Brunswick Rural and Urban Transportation Advisory Committee led by Dr. Yves Bourgeois, Dean of the Université de Moncton’s Shipagan campus, was commissioned by the Gallant government to develop a 20-year public transportation strategy for the province.

Released in 2017, the report recommended a provincial transportation strategy that included commitments to invest in transportation services as well as the promotion of initiatives that align with public, private and community assets.

It identified the need to change the province’s dependence on private vehicles sooner rather than later because of the “heavy financial burden on middle income families.” The report also pointed out that people living in poverty or those with a disability, especially in rural areas of the province, may not be able to have a car to access jobs, services and social connections.

“All this is detrimental to the quality of life of families and communities,” the report said.

The report also recognized that “available, affordable and accessible mobility options” are instrumental in job creation, youth retention, keeping healthcare costs low, and achieving lower carbon targets, while the lack of transportation options burdens government finances as fewer people work and pay taxes, while increasing public service delivery costs.

“Improving access is not only a question of fairness; it is also about tapping into our most valuable resources: our people,” said Coon.

Coon argues that “public transportation is a public good, that needs to be publicly funded,” and said, “it is atrocious that the Government of New Brunswick will not provide funding to support this essential transportation infrastructure in a province where so many people lack the ability or income necessary to drive, yet need to go to the doctor frequently because of high rates of chronic disease and cancer.”

“Everywhere else in Canada 50 per cent of the costs of public transportation is publicly funded, with the balance coming from ticket sales,” said Coon.

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