

OUR UNION VOICE



Public Service Alliance of Canada
Alliance de la Fonction publique du Canada



BUILDING A FIGHTING UNION

INSIDE:

- Strike solidarity
- Fair retirement benefits
- Still Thirsty for Justice

PUBLICATIONS MAIL AGREEMENT NO. 40062596
RETURN UNDELIVERABLE CANADIAN ADDRESSES TO
PUBLIC SERVICE ALLIANCE OF CANADA
233 GILMOUR STREET
OTTAWA ON K2P 0P1

CANADA		POSTES
POST		CANADA
Postage paid		Port payé
Publications Mail		Poste-publications
40062596		

Help us stay in touch

Have you moved, changed your phone number or personal email address?

Please be sure to update your information at psacunion.ca/user or call us at 1-888-604-7722.

Want to get the latest news?

 Sign up for email updates: psacunion.ca/mailling-list

 facebook.com/psac.national

 Instagram @psacafpc

 @psac_afpc

Vol. 17, Issue N° 2 · 2023

IN THIS ISSUE

- Northern health care workers call for action 3
- Beyond land acknowledgements 3
- Building a fighting union 4
- Coming together during the strike 5
- Striking Iqaluit workers knew their worth 5
- Government failing on clean water for all 6
- Still Thirsty for Justice 6
- Fair retirement benefits. 7
- Resilience in the face of northern wildfires. 7

Our Union Voice is a publication of the Public Service Alliance of Canada. Representing 225,000 members, PSAC is one of Canada's largest unions and is affiliated with the Canadian Labour Congress and internationally to Public Services International.

Executive Editor: Tasia Brown
Managing Editors: Izzy Pouliot and Michael Aubry
Editors: Seema Lamba, Lorna Mungur, Ruth Greer
Design, layout and production: Ruth Greer, Shannon Hawn
Translation: PSAC Language Services
ISSN: 1718-8652
Public Service Alliance of Canada
233 Gilmour Street, Ottawa ON K2P 0P1
613-560-4200
Ce bulletin est aussi disponible en français sous le titre *Le Rassembleur*.



EDITORIAL

Our union just came out of one of the largest strikes in Canadian history. This was a historic fight to secure fair wages and better working conditions for more than 155,000 federal public service workers.

I am grateful to each and every one of you who answered the call and joined over 100,000 members from coast to coast to coast on the picket lines — your willingness to put everything on the line and fight for a fair contract for yourself and your fellow workers is the true meaning of solidarity.

I'm also grateful to all the PSAC members who were not part of the strike, yet still showed your support in so many ways. Your solidarity was crucial.

This was a hard-fought victory not only for PSAC members, but for all workers in Canada — private, public, unionized, and non-unionized. Our strike was proof that when workers stick together, we can make real gains.

This employer fought tooth and nail against us. They pushed back on every reasonable bargaining demand. There was no urgency to get to a deal.

For nearly two years the government dragged their feet and refused to meaningfully negotiate a contract with our Treasury Board units and Canada Revenue Agency members. They did this because they know that when bargaining moves slowly it takes the wind out of our sails – it makes it harder to get to the deal federal public service workers deserve.

While we aim to push bargaining forward, deficiencies in the *Federal Public Sector Labour Relations Act* and related legislation — including the Public Interest Commission process — negatively affect our ability to get to a



deal quickly. That's why — in advance of the next round of bargaining — we're turning our focus to pushing this government to make changes to the legislation.

It's time to bring legislation in line with the same measures and protections many PSAC members outside the federal government enjoy. It's time to fix a broken labour relations regime that frustrates the bargaining and representation processes for all parties.

Our strike didn't just secure better working conditions for our membership — we built a stronger union for years to come. I saw a new generation of PSAC activists on picket lines each day. The passion and energy you bring to our union will set the foundation for stronger locals everywhere.

Now that the strike is behind us, it's time to roll up our sleeves and get to work on modernizing the federal labour relations act, while continuing with our efforts to make our workplaces and communities better places for everyone.

In solidarity,

Chris Aylward, National President



Northern health care workers call for action amid chronic understaffing

Amanda Arsenault is a registered pharmacy technician who has spent the last nine years working in Rankin Inlet, making sure eight community health centres in Nunavut have the medical supplies they need. Despite the complexities of supplying for northern communities that require air freight shipments, Amanda has always worked alone.

Recently, though, Amanda's employer hired another worker to assist with the coordination. She's relieved to finally have additional help because even now, with two pharmacy technicians, the work is piling up.

PSAC represents approximately 4,000 health care workers across the country, and many face similar staffing issues, which have been amplified since the pandemic. In the North, chronic understaffing has been a problem for decades, and it's only getting worse.

For Heidi Young, a community health nurse in Nunavut, insufficient staffing means she's often doing the job of two or three people at once.



The community health centre model is really good. Nurses run immunization programs, provide prenatal care and so much more. But because we have so few nurses, we're constantly putting out fires and I'm forced to prioritize emergencies. This leaves little time for preventative care."

– Heidi Young



Amanda Arsenault

Christian Norwick is an ICU nurse in Yellowknife, but regularly wears several different hats. He also cleans, liaises with families, and helps with patient rehabilitation — tasks that would usually fall on a janitor, social worker, and physiotherapist.

Working in chronically understaffed conditions means few or no colleagues to talk to and share the workload. "All our issues in the workplace are related to staffing," he said. "People are being denied vacation requests and burning out and there are more and more gaps in patient care."

According to Northern Health Care Matters, rather than staffing up, territorial governments have been paying millions of dollars to hire contract workers from private agencies, which is an inefficient and costly short-term solution.

Agency workers come in for short periods of time and often don't know how to do the work required, yet these workers are earning double or triple the pay of government health workers. This only creates more work for our members who are already on the brink of burnout.

Contract workers also rarely receive proper cultural sensitivity training. Access to culturally relevant health care is an essential part of reconciliation with Indigenous peoples but is impossible when communities are left without reliable services.

Amanda, Christian and Heidi agree that it's time for governments to take the health care crisis seriously. In the North, it starts with competitive wages that reflect the cost of living and good, secure jobs.



The money spent on private agencies could be spent on long term solutions like retention programs, incentives, and training for northerners to become health care workers. It could be spent on community programming that benefit the people who live up North."

– Christian Norwick

Privatization in our health care system hurts workers, patients, and their families. It's time to focus on made-in-the-North health care that puts people first.

Contributors: Lorna Mungur and Jeffrey Vallis

Beyond land acknowledgements: Go Smudge Yourself podcast

Want to be a better Indigenous ally?

Join Jen Greenway, a passionate writer and activist from the Tahltan-Kaska Nations, on her podcast, "Go Smudge Yourself," where she explores crucial topics such as Reconciliation, LandBack, Idle No More 2.0, and the different ways you can become a real ally to Indigenous Peoples.

With a blend of informal lessons, thought-provoking dialogue, and insightful decolonial book reviews, "Go Smudge Yourself" serves as an important platform for Indigenous people and allies. It's a podcast that invites everyone to delve into the depths of history, foster understanding, and embark on a journey of healing together, fostering strong nation-to-nation relationships.

Available on most streaming platforms.





BUILDING A FIGHTING UNION: How PSAC's national strike made us stronger

PSAC's national general strike for federal workers was an historic moment in the history of our union. Over 100,000 members came together and took collective action, winning new collective agreements that raised the bar for all PSAC members and for every worker in Canada.

This could not have been accomplished without the help of thousands of PSAC members from coast to coast who rose to the challenge and took on leadership roles during the strike.

Jessica Dagasso works at the Service Canada office in Nanaimo and volunteered to help deliver supplies and coordinate picket lines.



It was a learning curve, but it felt great — being able to show up and provide the support that members needed. As a younger worker, I felt empowered."

— Jessica Dagasso

Odeisa Stewart, hired during the pandemic at Employment and Social Development Canada in Dartmouth, was encouraged to help lead the strike in her area.

"Sometimes people see something in you which you don't even see yourself. I'll use this as a learning experience," she said with a laugh. "I learned a lot about problem solving."

"I also learned about myself and about solidarity. I feel like there's going to be a time where we're all called upon to have a hand in making the world better. We need to keep being kind and support each other in any way we can."

Deanna Allain works for CRA and lives in Hamilton. As a teenager, Deanna successfully lobbied the provincial government for improved accessibility legislation — when the strike came, she knew first-hand that action gets results.



I'm a Gen Z, who is new to the workforce. I'd never been in a union before, but I had experience with — and I loved — activism. I know what people working together can accomplish. I was glad to be a part of helping move things forward."

— Deanna Allain

Martin Trudel-Racine is a deckhand for the Coast Guard, based in Québec, and took the lead coordinating picket lines in his area. After the strike, Martin says members feel like they're part of a broader movement.

"During a strike you feel like you're not alone in this, you feel you have the power," he said. "I think the strike was like a muscle. We have to keep using that muscle to keep it in good shape between rounds of bargaining. That's how we'll continue to make gains."

PSAC'S national strike unleashed a wave of activism and energy within our union and built the blueprint for future contracts for all PSAC members.

Now, we need to keep exercising our union strength. Read the full version of this article to find out about ways you can get involved and help continue to build our union and make a difference in your workplace.

Contributor: Patrick Bragg

Read the full version of this article, online.



BEHIND THE PICKET LINES: Coming together during the strike

From marching bands to conga lines and elaborate food stands, PSAC members showed up, came together, and made some noise at picket lines across the country during the largest strike in Canada's history earlier this year.

But for members who couldn't physically join the picket line and required an accommodation, PSAC provided other opportunities to get involved. Members were able to help their fellow strikers from behind the scenes and help their communities.

In Summerside, PEI, leaders quickly realized that members unable to picket for a variety of reasons could have an impact in their community, while showing support to those on the picket lines. Operating out of a community hall, they not only prepared food for strikers, but also contributed to their local food bank and made blankets for patients at the children's hospital and oncology centre.

"This strike was a massive undertaking for the union and our local. I am proud that while we served our members, we were also able to give back to the community," said Maureen Getson, UTE local 90006 president.

“
We love our home, and for our members who couldn't be out on the picket line, it was a meaningful way to participate and devote time to our community. It was a way to show the people of Summerside that we as a union care about our community, and we appreciated their support back.”

– Maureen Getson
UTE local 90006 president



In Iqaluit, PSAC members started a new tradition; a community coffee break every Friday during the strike. It was a moment of solidarity where members could pause and share their stories. This initiative became more and more popular, especially with the support of local businesses offering food discounts and generous community members who donated to facilitate these heartwarming gatherings.

Every community had their own heartwarming stories of people coming together and supporting one another during the strike.

Contributor: Marietou Diallo

Striking Iqaluit workers knew their worth

If you've ever been on a picket line before, you'll know that it can be extremely difficult to keep your energy high while fighting for your future. Life's ups and downs don't wait until you are off the line.



That was certainly the case for the thirteen workers at the Iqaluit Housing Authority (IHA), who spent 137 days on strike during the longest job action in Nunavut's history. While they were locked out by their employer, they battled the territory's unforgiving weather and grappled with replacement workers who were being flown in to cross the picket line and do their jobs — dragging out the strike and dividing their community.

Audrey Mélanie had only been in Iqaluit for a few weeks when the strike was called. Formerly a nurse and the only member who had prior experience with job action, she moved to Iqaluit to work as an administration clerk, a job she would soon love.

"Everyone, staff and our managers, got along before the strike. But it was almost like we had to destroy this sense of family to build it again, stronger," said Mélanie. She admits

that despite how hard it was to be on strike, it made her want to get more involved in her union. "We cried so much and we achieved so much. Nothing can compare to the smiles on the day that we got back to work."

Anti-scab legislation

Tensions were high when replacement workers from the south were brought in — who were better paid and received housing allowances IHA's own employees never did.

"The encounters in the community were toxic," said Jason Rochon, president of the Nunavut Employees Union.

Rochon is cautiously optimistic that anti-scab legislation promised by the federal government will be an effective tool to push employers to respect workers and the collective bargaining process.

"Over 90% of the workers who held the line are young and Inuit," said Rochon. Because they held the line and fought for better, they secured a hard-fought collective agreement that protects them against Nunavut's high cost of living and secures better working conditions.

“
They knew their worth and they were right. They knew that they were helping their communities and were there for each other. Because of their example, workers won't take the first deal that's offered to them.”

– Jason Rochon
President, Nunavut Employees Union

Contributor: Shaheen Lotun

The government is failing its commitment to safe, clean drinking water

With over two decades of experience in water systems, David Martin ensures that the Canadian Forces Base at Goose Bay maintains a supply of safe and clean drinking water day in and day out as an industrial water treatment technician.

As an Inuit member, he considers himself fortunate to have access to safe, clean drinking water, a privilege that many Canadians take for granted. Far too many Indigenous communities across Canada still grapple with unreliable access to clean, safe water.

In 2015, the Liberal government promised safe drinking water for everyone in Canada by 2021. But today, there are still 67 long and short-term drinking water advisories affecting First Nations reserves. The government does not track boil water advisories in many other Indigenous communities such as Inuit and Métis settlements.

Access to clean, safe drinking water is a fundamental human right. The absence of clean water directly contributes to a myriad of health problems and should be treated as a public health emergency, yet it continues to be inadequately addressed.

For David, an expert in water systems, the solutions are readily available and not always complex. Unfortunately, the issue remains

a lack of federal funding to prioritize clean water and allocate resources to implement solutions.

According to a 2021 report by Canada's Parliamentary Budget Officer, the government is falling short by \$138 million per year in investments to build and maintain water systems for First Nations.

"A comprehensive study should be done of all contaminated sites," said Martin. "It's crucial to assess the severity of the situation. This study would not only provide insights into water treatment methods, but also determine whether it's safe for people to continue living there."

The next step should be to determine the kind of decontamination that is needed.



All solutions need to be Indigenous-led. This is the only way to resolve long-term water issues. Indigenous communities are tired of the government's paternalistic ways — they need more control over their waters, lands, and resources. This represents a vital step towards reconciliation."

— David Martin



David Martin and Michelle Woods

Michelle Woods, who works at Indigenous Services Canada and is one of PSAC's Ontario National Indigenous Peoples Circle representatives agrees the key to solving the water crisis is adequate funding.

"We need to keep raising awareness" she said. "Keep letting people know what's going on, encourage them to learn about how communities are impacted, how people are living there and how the water crisis is affecting them."

Water is essential to sustaining life and our communities, and we have a responsibility to be its stewards with the guidance of Indigenous peoples.

Find out more about PSAC's partnership with Indigenous communities fighting for water justice through the Still Thirsty for Justice campaign.

Contributors: Lorna Mungur, Patrick Bragg

A new chapter in the fight for water justice

Last year, PSAC launched our **Still Thirsty for Justice** campaign, joining the Indigenous communities of Grassy Narrows and Samson Cree calling for universal access to clean, safe water for all. Now, we're launching phase 2 of the campaign — we have been collecting stories from PSAC members nationwide to shed light on their enduring water insecurity and continue to pressure the federal government to address Canada's water crisis.

Canada boasts the world's third-largest freshwater reserves, yet dozens of First Nations communities still lack access to safe drinking water.



Check out the next phase of our campaign, read stories from our members across the country and take action today in the fight for water justice.



StillThirstyforJustice.ca

25 and out: The fight for a dignified retirement

Rita Dabrowski, a border services officer based in Victoria, BC and member of the Customs and Immigration Union (CIU), knows firsthand the physical risks that come with her job. A series of injuries, surgeries, and relentless pain mark her nearly 25 years of service.



“The longer I stay, the more cumulative the injuries will be,” said Rita. “I want to retire with dignity, and as able-bodied as I can be. But I’m suffering more injuries as I get older, and those injuries are lasting longer.”

That’s why national firefighters and members at the Canada Border Services Agency — public safety workers who put their lives on the line every day — are leading a campaign to retire with full benefits after 25 years of service (referred to as “25 and out”). It’s not just reasonable, it’s necessary.

Jason Elder, a civilian firefighter for 18 years with the Department of National Defence in Suffield, Alberta, and a member of the Union of National Defence Employees (UNDE), echoes Dabrowski’s concerns.



I call it the ‘work until you die pension’ because with cancers and heart issues related to the occupation, people aren’t able to enjoy their retirement. There’s a reason why most municipal fire departments have early — or equitable — retirement.”

— Jason Elder

Most public safety workers in Canada already benefit from early retirement options, including most firefighters, air traffic controllers, RCMP constables, and operational employees at Correctional Service Canada.

The government has committed to making legislative amendments to provide 25-and-out early retirement benefits in the last round of bargaining with FB members but has not yet implemented these changes.

This is not an issue that can simply be resolved at the bargaining table because it requires updates to the *Public Service Superannuation Act* and *Income Tax Act*. That’s why PSAC and its components are intensifying our lobbying efforts for pension reform by sharing our members’ stories and shining a light on the human impact.

It’s time for the federal government to move forward with these long overdue changes to ensure public safety workers receive fair retirement benefits.

Contributor: Jeffrey Vallis

Resilience in the face of devastating northern wildfires

When wildfires began to ravage the Northwest Territories, PSAC members were on the front lines supporting relief efforts across the territory, including firefighters and healthcare workers. More than 20,000 residents were affected by evacuation orders across the territory.

Trevor Bourgeois, a seasoned firefighter with the Yellowknife Airport, was helping with the Hay River evacuation when he was called back to Yellowknife to evacuate his home city. Despite being separated from their families during the crisis, Bourgeois and his colleagues were ready to do whatever was needed to protect their community.



We were given the option to evacuate, but all of the firefighters stayed back, and many of the maintenance workers, too. We all wanted to give our best to get the best outcome for our city.”

— Trevor Bourgeois

Bourgeois worked in baggage handling, security, and transportation at the airport while evacuations were ongoing, but his work didn’t stop at the airport. He also helped with cutting brush and driving dump trucks to clear areas at risk of wildfires.

“A lot of us had to step up and put on different hats, but the morale between anybody who stayed back and helped was very high,” he said. “Everybody got along and worked great together.”

Phil von Allmen, a correctional officer at the North Slave Correctional Complex in Yellowknife, assisted with the evacuation of inmates before he too began picking up new responsibilities. Fortunately, his extensive experience operating heavy equipment meant he could easily transition to creating firebreaks and clearing combustible materials to safeguard the city.

“There was quite a big volunteer base that stayed behind and a lot of people who, regardless of their experience level, were doing everything they could to help out,” said von Allmen.



There are a lot of people that love Yellowknife and love the North, and it was amazing to see all these people come together. I have a lot of pride for our community.”

— Phil von Allmen

Extreme weather conditions due to climate change have resulted in Canada’s worst wildfire season on record, with over 6,100 wildfires and more than 15 million hectares burned. Nearly 200,000 Canadians have been placed under evacuation orders at some point this year.

PSAC members in affected communities across the country have shown unwavering determination and unity, underscoring the resilience and sense of community that define the North.

Contributor: Jeffrey Vallis



THIS IS WHAT *Solidarity* LOOKS LIKE!



(When we say)
SO-SO-SO

(You say)
SOLIDARITY!



Public Service Alliance of Canada
Alliance de la Fonction publique du Canada

(When we say)
THE WORKERS UNITED

(You say)
WILL NEVER BE DEFEATED