

# FIRE THIS TIME



**The Newspaper of the Fire This Time Movement for Social Justice**

Issue 13 - Special Issue

[www.fire-this-time.org](http://www.fire-this-time.org)

FREE

## SUPPORT HOSPITAL WORKERS!

## DEFEND PUBLIC HEALTH CARE!

By Ivan Drury

*"No matter what this government says about HEU members, they cannot run a health care system without us. We are standing our ground and we won't back down!"*  
- VGH Picket Line News Issue #1 (distributed at the Vancouver General Hospital picket line on Thursday April 29<sup>th</sup>)

On Thursday April 22<sup>nd</sup> at midnight the Hospital Employees Union gave up on waiting for the essential services designation needed to go on strike and agreed to the levels previously set. They immediately gave 72 hours notice to the time strike action would begin.

By the time the 72 hours ran out, the level of enthusiasm for the strike had resonated so strongly throughout the province that the originally planned overtime ban kick-off fell away for a full scale strike. Picket lines went up at every hospital and long term care facility in BC. After three years of devastating attacks from the reactionary BC Liberal government, 43,000 health care worker had finally gone out on strike and the entire BC labour movement was immediately electrified.

### The BC Liberals attack Health Care Workers

*"We have some huge cost pressures. We have to make sure we find cost savings, otherwise we have to divert more money away from direct patient care in order to pay support workers who are already paid higher than any other province in Canada. And that doesn't make sense."* - BC Minister of Health, Colin Hansen

In 2002 the BC Liberal government

to turn the current capitalist crisis into profit. For the capitalist government, the only acceptable wages are the lowest ones possible.

### The HEU Fights Back

*"The lines are drawn in BC today between the government... and labour."* - Peter Mansbridge, CBC anchor, April 29, 04

In the spring of last year, the leadership of the HEU recommended that the membership accept a deal from the employer that included rolled back wages, benefits and working conditions and capped the number of union layoffs at 5,000. In a massively important show of strength and solidarity, the membership rejected the offer.

One year later, facing increasing layoffs, contracting out and an expiring contract, the HEU membership voted overwhelmingly, 89%, for strike action. The provincial government's refusal to negotiate or re-consider their massive, 100 page concessions package that includes more layoffs, wage roll backs and benefit reductions left the workers with no choice but to strike.

### HEU Defies the employer... and the government

When the HEU went on strike on Sunday April 25, Health Minister Colin Hansen immediately blamed the union for the loss of non-essential services at hospitals and care facilities saying, "We need to sort this out at a table and not by making patients the victims of their strike action."

Just one week before making this comment, Hansen had called in a mediator for these negotiations, but had remained so rigid that the mediator walked out.



Picket of HEU workers and their supporters, including members of Mobilization Against War and Occupation, at Vancouver General Hospital, April 30<sup>th</sup> 2004.

the \$65 million severance fund from the previous contract, introduced retroactive wage rollbacks so workers would have to give back money they have already earned, increased work hours and eliminated any cap on contracting out positions.

A rally was held at noon on Thursday April 29<sup>th</sup>. The executive came out of their meeting and announced that the union would defy the legislation. HEU spokesperson Chris Allnutt said, "You are to respect the protest line until we decide it is time for you to go back to work." The over 500 people who had gathered cheered and

supporting the HEU strike

Working people and unions in BC cannot afford to allow the BC Liberals to uphold the back to work legislation they have leveled at the HEU. The implications of allowing this legislation to stand would be a setback for all working people and trade unionists. If the capitalist class can force unionists and working people to go back to work under worse conditions than before they struck, it not only destroys the right of collective bargaining, it would be a severe deterrent to bargaining at all.

At the root of the attack on the HEU is

the job at the same time. CUPE president Barry O'Neill said, "By early next week it's probably going to be the vast majority of our 70,000 members." Electrical workers and Hydro workers throughout the province also talked of taking the same solidarity job action, said Wayne McIvor of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers.

And while workers are organizing and planning, the boss and the BC Liberal government is taking the case to the labour relations board to have the strike ruled illegal and to make the back to work legislation

## SPECIAL ISSUE IN SUPPORT OF STRIKING HEU WORKERS

tore up the Hospital Employees Union contract and passed Bill 29 in the dead of night at the end of a marathon sitting of the legislature. The Bill was the first major step towards the privatization of health care in BC. It let health care facility management fire workers and contract their positions out to non-union labour.

The 6,500 HEU workers who lost their jobs since the passing of Bill 29 were mostly women and people of colour, making this one of the worst blows against pay equity gains ever seen in this province. Health Minister Colin Hansen's comments, in this context, means that workers have no rights in BC when faced with the agenda of the BC Liberal government

By late Wednesday night, with massive support of unions and working and poor people throughout the province behind the HEU, the government introduced 'back to work' legislation to the legislature. Bill 37 passed early in the morning, and started panic amongst workers on the picket lines. Suddenly, their strike had lost its legality.

In the one of the most brutal and reactionary 'back to work' legislations in Canadian history, Bill 37 undercut even the contract rejected by the HEU membership one year before. Under Bill 37, the government legislated itself the power to completely destroy the HEU through unlimited contracting out of its membership to private companies. It eliminated

chanted for a general strike.

When asked what the difference between a protest line and a picket line is, Allnutt said, "We're calling it a protest line because that's what it is. We're protesting against the government's legislation that was rammed through the house in the early hours of the morning. That's not acceptable to us and we are going to continue to protest against it. And we as a union are going to decide when our members return to work."

### Support Health Care Workers!

*"The premier has drawn a line in the sand that goes so deep that working people are left with little choice but to defy this government."* - Barry O'Neill, CUPE BC President on

a thinly veiled attack on the rights of all working people in BC. Suddenly, workers in BC are finding ourselves back in the early days of unionism, where we must fight for our right to strike or even be in effective unions at all. Above all, the rights of the Health Care workers must be defended and their struggle today must be supported by all working and poor people in BC.

By nightfall of April 29<sup>th</sup>, the day Bill 37 passed, 100 Hydro workers at the WAC Bennett dam in Hudson's Hope walked off their jobs in solidarity with the HEU. The BC Teachers Federation announced strike action at many of its locals starting the next day, and at least 15,000 CUPE BC members planned to walk off

enforceable by law.

One thing is certain: this is a fight for the labour, health care and democratic rights of all working and poor people in BC against the profit driven neo-liberal agenda of the BC Liberal government. Particularly on Mayday, the historical lessons of solidarity show that we must stand our ground. We must all unite behind the Hospital Workers for health care, workers rights and justice. WE WILL WIN!

To support the strike for as long as it is going on, go to your nearest hospital or long term care facility and join the picket line.

**For out: updates, check [www.heu.org](http://www.heu.org)**



# HEU Strikes Back for Workers Rights and Health Care

## An Interview with Fred Muzin, President of the BC Hospital Employees Union (HEU)

By Ivan Drury

Since coming to power in 2001, the BC Liberals have set their sites on the destruction of trade unions and the reduction of wages and securities of working and poor people overall. The attacks they have carried out against the HEU have been a cornerstone in their attacks.

A union with a membership of 87% women, a majority of whom are people of colour, the HEU is an obvious starting point for a government that strives to drive back all progressive gains made by working people in this province.

For this reason, much of the provincial fightback against the BC Liberal agenda has also focussed around the HEU. When we last interviewed Fred Muzin in February of 2003 (see FTT issue #2), he and his union were preparing for a long battle for the rights of their membership. This interview was conducted on the eve of the beginning of that strike that has been so long coming and has fast become the most important labour struggle in recent BC history. The active support of Fred and the HEU by all poor and working people in BC is more important today than ever before.

**Fire This Time: Right now you are in negotiations for some 43,000 workers in BC?**

**Fred Muzin:** That's right, in the facilities sector in health care.

**FTT: And its against the BC Liberal Government, the employer, who has laid off thousands of people in the last three years and is continuing to carry out these layoffs even under negotiations.**

**Fred Muzin:** Well so far they have pink slipped over 6,700 of our members and over 2,500 since bargaining began in January through the guise of contracting out. The government stripped away all of our protections against contracting out by enacting Bill 29 two years ago.

**FTT: Even with an 89% strike vote and massive support of unions in the province behind you, including the BC Federation of Labour, the government is continuing with their hundred-page concessions package and massive layoffs. Why do you think the government is continuing these attacks?**

**Fred Muzin:** Well, they have an ideological agenda. They want to privatize health care; it's one of the areas where companies believe they can still make a lot of profit. The government does not believe in public services or in any sense of community in our society, so they are trying to drive their agenda. The public sector, and particularly health care, is one of the areas where new Canadians and particularly women have made decent economic gains. They believe that if they can destroy the public sector then they can create a very entrenched, rich-poor kind of economy and they can reward their friends who make big political donations. Their view of society



Fred Muzin.

is that you have the very rich and then you have virtual slavery for other people. It is straight Margaret Thatcherism.

**FTT: Can you give us an update on how HEU is proceeding with negotiations right now?**

**Fred Muzin:** There are no real negotiations. We met with the employer on March 31<sup>st</sup> after we achieved an 89% strike vote and we expected that there would be some understanding from the employer that if they wanted to avoid disruption of services that they had better hold off their 109 page concession package. It includes things like a wage roll back (anything from \$55 a month to 12%), an increase in workweek and decrease wages to 34%, decrease in sick leave benefits, a revised costing for benefits that would cost people \$2,000 to \$3,000 more a year and it just went on and on and on.

Now, when we met with them after the strike vote, they made some minor moves, but one of the things that was most shocking in their \$300 million concessions package was that they decided to eliminate sort of this three-tiered roll back of 55, 8 and 12 and replace it with 9 and a half percent for everybody across the board in wage rollbacks. This scooped in 200 more classifications including people whose occupations have huge skill shortages. They have no understanding or appreciation.

Last week they unilaterally applied for mediation, but when we met with the mediator last Friday they had nothing more to offer. They were in the same entrenched position they were on April 2<sup>nd</sup>. Why they engaged the mediator is still a mystery to us. We are proceeding along with our plans

to take job action because that is the only way to push back against a government that will not listen to any reason, and has absolutely no respect for the public workforce.

**FTT: The public sector is one of the fields where women have made gains as far**

**as being able to have a job that has decent wages or livable wages at any rate. Today a Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives study was released that shows that women hospital workers in BC today are the lowest paid in Canada, 26% below the national average. Do you think the BC Liberal government is targeting women?**

**Fred Muzin:** I think that by going after health care, where 87% of our members are women, they are. It's reflective of a whole bunch of moves that this government has made, everywhere from the attacks on child-care to the closing down of Women's transition centres on April 1<sup>st</sup> to cutting welfare rates. This is just another example. In effect they want to eliminate pay equity, they do not believe in it. They believe that women should not even be in the work force, they should be

at home looking after kids and seniors and there is no government responsibility.

So, yeah the Campbell government is very misogynist, there is no question about it. That's one of the reasons they are going so hard after health care workers, is because through a lot of militancy at all levels of the public sector we have been able to try and equal out the huge economic discrimination against women and men working in female dominated occupations. So yeah, they have targeted us absolutely, there is no question.

**FTT: With all these layoffs, the ones that are still going on and the ones going to happen to these women and all these hospital workers? What are their options?**

**Fred Muzin:** There are a number of options. They do get a notice period. It's not good severance but under Bill 29, they do get a sixty-day notice period. After that, they can basically apply for unemployment insurance, and you know how the federal government attacked that. Either they apply for jobs with contractors, where most of them are not being hired, but these jobs are paying nine or ten dollars an hour and you simply can't live on that, and these jobs have no benefits.

So they can basically beg for a job or at some point, when they exhaust their savings, they can go on welfare. There's re-training but with the numbers of people laid off and the lack of government programs

*Continued on page 4*

*This is the newspaper of the*  
**Fire This Time Movement  
for Social Justice**

[www.fire-this-time.org](http://www.fire-this-time.org)

Special HEU Issue

Issue 13

**Editorial Board:** Shannon Bundock, Mike Krebs, Ali Yerevani, Nasim Sedaghat, Ivan Drury, Rachel Taylor

**Editor:** Ali Yerevani

**Layout & Design:** Mike Krebs

**Copy Editing:** Tamara Hansen

**Phone/Fax:** (604) 322-1764

**Email:** [info@fire-this-time.org](mailto:info@fire-this-time.org)

**Mail:** PO Box 21607

**Vancouver BC**

**V5L 5G3**

**submissions:** We welcome articles, letters, and unsolicited submissions. However, we cannot promise publication. Submissions can be made by email, fax, or mail.

*The opinions expressed in this newspaper are those of the authors, and do not necessarily represent those of Fire This Time.*

*This newspaper could not have been possible without the generous contributions from our supporters.*

# In Defence of Health Care

## Voices from the Hospital Employees Union picket line

By Brennan Luchsinger  
& Ivan Drury

On April 29<sup>th</sup>, the BC Liberals passed unprecedented back to work legislation to force the Hospital Employees Union back on the job with a 15% pay cut and without any job security. Throughout the morning the workers on the picket line were tense, angry and worried, as they awaited word from the HEU leadership on how the union was going to respond.

At 12:30pm, the executive came out of their meeting and announced that the HEU had decided to defy the BC Liberal's legislation by maintaining a 'Protest Line' against the back to work order.

Cheers went up from the HEU membership and supporters who remained determined to fight against the concessions package from the employer, the privatization of health care and the legislation that Chris Allnutt, spokesperson for the HEU called 'draconian and mean spirited.'

Fire This Time, along with members of Youth Third World Alliance and Mobilization Against War and Occupation have walked the picket (and then protest) lines with the defiant membership of the HEU throughout the four days that it has stood. On Thursday, April 29<sup>th</sup>, the day some workers on the line called 'D-Day,' Ivan Drury and Brennan Luchsinger from Fire This Time and Youth Third World Alliance interviewed some of these workers and workers from other unions who were also out on the line to support health care workers.

**legislation that passed early this morning ordering the HEU back to work?**

I think, from what I have seen on the line today is that people are angry, very angry. This is not a money issue for anybody. It's a job security issue. They keep contracting out, more and more folks keep dropping off and they're becoming destitute.

As you've seen all over the place, people are having to make some really serious household decisions, they can't pay their mortgages, they're not getting hired by the contract companies. They're in dire straits and they're angry and from what I've got so far today people are willing to stand up and defend their positions. They want to stand their ground.

**As someone on the ground on the picket-lines, who is organizing the pickets around this building [Vancouver General Hospital], what can people who are not HEU members do to support you at this desperate hour?**

I think that it is time for people to really look at the effects of what is being imposed on us is going to ripple and have the effect on the rest of the labour movement.

The communities have been very positive and very supportive and coming out. They know that the rates that they [the BC Liberals] are trying to introduce into the province along with the new poverty level, I think that the rest of the labour movement especially, but that everyone across BC should be worried about what is going on with health care.

The contracting out and the privatization just scares me, it scares the hell out of me.



HEU workers and their supporters picketing at Vancouver General Hospital, April 29th 2004.



HEU workers on Strike in Nelson BC, April 28th 2004.

These HEU members, whose voices are recorded below, were among the many who welcomed us, thanked us for our support and asked us to come back with more and more people to join the fight for health care and workers rights everyday until the strike is won.

To these people and to the HEU, Fire This Time responds: The brave health care workers who are leading this fight against the BC Liberal government's profit driven agenda are the ones all working and poor people in BC must thank. The rest of us are proud to join and support you. Together, We Will Win!

**Jacquie Janum, Servicing Rep for HEU and Care Aid**

What is the membership response to the

**Raj Chouhan, Director of Bargaining for the Hospital Employees Union**

**What decision was made just now in response to the BC Liberal's legislation that was passed early this morning?**

The provincial executive of the HEU has decided that Bill 37 is a bad law. We don't recognize it. Our protest line will continue all over BC. We are standing up to defend our rights and to defend public health care.

**What is the implication of this protest line for workers rights in this province and for the relationship of labour unions together against the provincial government?**

Workers are standing up to defend public

health care. The implications? I don't know. It's up to the Liberals. Knowing the Liberals and what they have been doing these last three years, causing chaos all over BC, I don't think they have any respect for working people. They might take some harsh steps against workers to try to intimidate us, but I think the thousands of healthcare workers across BC understand that enough is enough. What more can they do?

Many of our members are already waiting to get lay-off notices. There is no security left. Under Bill 37 they are forcing the workers to go back to work without any job security. In the past, when they forced the teachers, the doctors, the nurses back to work, at least there was a wage increase there and at least there was job security there.

The Liberals are saying [to us], 'you have absolutely no right to job security, you have absolutely no right to defend your rights,' no matter how long you have been working in the industry. That's unacceptable.

**What level of support have you had from other unions in the province?**

I was at the New Westminster District Labour Council last night, I spoke to the delegates there and we got a tremendous amount of support from everybody. You can tell from the honking going by on the street here that the support is increasing. The Liberals should wake up. They think that by intimidating HEU the public will support the Liberals, but it's going the other way, it's going to backfire.

**What can people do to help?**

I hope that more people will continue to come out to our picket lines, our protest lines, continue to call their Liberal MLAs and tell them that what they are doing is not acceptable. It is important that we protect our public health care. My message to anyone who is reading this is to please continue to support our health care workers. We need your support. Together we can defeat this BC Liberal agenda.

Thank you Raj.

**Ken Elwoorthy, Sheetmetal Workers and Roofers Union organizer**

**Why are you down here today supporting HEU?**

The reason I'm down here today is because we've got to support our brothers and sisters because we're all in this together.

**What impact do you think the decision of the HEU to stay out despite the Provincial Government's legislation is going to have overall for the labour movement in this province?**

I think we've got to put up a fight and it's got to be sooner rather than later.

Thank-you very much.

**Albert Lee, HEU member**

**What do you see happening for the HEU after the passing of this back to work legislation?**

This is kind of ridiculous. Now this legislation is being crammed down our throats. This isn't just affecting us, this is affecting other unions also. You've got to remember, if they can do this to us they can do it to anybody else. What's to stop them from saying, OK, you're being brought back, and then 2 weeks later to say, 'Guess what? We've decided to close your unit down.' We're getting contracted out. There's no security.

**Peter Lake, BC Ferry and Marine Workers Union**

**How do you see the BC Ferry and Marine Workers Union supporting the HEU in this strike?**

Well, I can't say anything officially, but for the people I work with down on the ships and stuff, we'd be willing to walk, no problem.

**So there's a high sentiment within the BC Ferry and Marine Workers Union about supporting the strike now?**

Most definitely. I think the government has shown that if their are willing to rip up an agreement and impose a 15% wage reduction, it doesn't matter what comes out of our binding arbitration, if they don't like it then they'll just change it. Y'know, if they can't deal with the union fairly then we'll just have to go out illegally.

Thanks a lot.

# Why All Poor, Working, and Oppressed People in BC Must Support the HEU Strike

From page 2

because they don't want to invest in people, it's going to be extremely difficult.

**FTT:** I want to ask you about a controversy over the last couple of years. The conflict between the HEU and the IWA has been going on for about a year now?

**Fred Muzin:** About a year and a half now.

**FTT:** Can you tell us in short, what the conflict is about and what it means, not only for you but for the labour movement on the whole in Canada?

**Fred Muzin:** The controversy is about one local of the IWA, 3567, deciding that they were going to enter into voluntary recognition agreements with contractors. They knew that the government was going to contract out services so they went and negotiated before they had any members or employees. They negotiated contracts that paid virtually just a little bit above employment standards or minimum wage, about \$9.50 an hour with nothing in the way of benefits or protections. They entered into those contracts. Then when the company managed to get contracts through the bidding process with the individual health employers, one of the conditions of employment was, for those desperate people who were willing to work for those wages, to sign an IWA card.

There are two things, one is that people never got to vote on their terms and conditions, and they never got to choose which union they wanted to represent them. Our position has been that this is our traditional work, that we have an established employment relationship and at least for a period of time, we should have the first opportunity to re-organize that work and re-organize those contractors.

We did file charges with the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), we went to arbitration, and our position was sustained. Other unions have been approached with the same kind of agreements by these corporations and they have chosen not to do that because they know it would erode the whole labour movement and decent wages and benefits for working people. So the CLC, about three or four week ago, did impose level one and two sanctions on the IWA and we're calling for them to basically throw them out until they stop doing this and reverse the damage they've already done. By signing these contracts they've undermined the whole provincial standard, the company says, 'well, we've got somebody for \$10 an hour, why should we pay anybody decently?'

It's had a very very negative impact. Also, it's a very well thought out government strategy to turn workers against workers. You have people who have been fired for no cause, who are desperate, against people who are desperate for any job trying to survive, and they're trying to get both sides fighting amongst themselves while the government laughs all the way to their golden handshake deal.

**FTT:** These cuts and privatization of health care affect the rights of workers in the province both through attacks on our labour rights as well as attacks on public health care. What can people who are not HEU members do to support health care workers in this fight against the BC Liberal government?

**Fred Muzin:** The struggle is really a struggle for justice and decency. They basically want to destroy the public health care system, which will impact everyone in our society. You will have an American style health care system where only the rich get care and other people, if they get



MAWO member Aaron Mercredi distributes letter of support for striking HEU workers at Vancouver General Hospital, April 30th 2004.

any care at all, will have to deal with long long line-ups.

The first thing is for people to become familiar with the issues and to understand the real threat to the Canadian way of life. And then it's to be out there advocating, telling your neighbours, telling your friends, writing letters to the editor, people meeting with their MLAs, telling them that they completely and absolutely oppose this government direction.

When we commence job action, it's to be out there standing side-by-side with health care workers, being part of the struggle no matter how long that goes or how difficult it becomes. People's natural tendency when they are under vicious attack is to feel very isolated and alone. So seeing people from the anti-poverty groups, the women's groups, the disabled community and the seniors and the students and the youth will be a tremendous shot in the arm and keep people together fighting side by side. That's what it's all about, we're either all going to advance as a society or we're all going to get devastated.

**FTT:** Do you have any closing comments, anything you want to say?

**Fred Muzin:** Just that it's very difficult in our bargaining situation, where the workers are more committed to the services of the patients and the residents who have become like family, when we're working for supervisors and bosses who don't care as much about the work they're supervising as the people who are actually providing the services.

A lot of the service that people are getting through the public health care system is despite bad management, despite management that intimidates and coerces. Because you sort of have a professional image when you are looking after patients in residence. But people don't see the turmoil going on behind the scenes, and the tremendous sacrifice people are making in order to preserve public services and a decent way of life for all Canadians.

If people would be sensitive to that and understand, and join in the struggle, that would mean a tremendous amount. People have to understand, they talk about social

engineering when you have social justice government, but this is the extreme of social engineering. This is just a cut above slavery. We don't choose to live in that kind of society and no government owns it, we own it. It's our society and we have a right to determine what that society looks like, how we spend our tax dollars. People have to be totally determined to disrupt society,

to become in effect ungovernable. If they're not prepared to become ungovernable then there will be unscrupulous people who will control their lives. That's what the struggle is really about.

**FTT:** Thank you very much Fred.

**Fred Muzin:** Thank-you.

## Letter of Support from Mobilization Against War and Occupation to the HEU

Friday April 23, 2004

To the BC Hospital Employees Union:

Upon receiving news of the BC HEU's notice for strike action, Mobilization Against War and Occupation (MAWO) the anti war, anti occupation coalition of Vancouver and the Lower Mainland with over 50 endorsing members (including the BC HEU) took the urgent and important decision to support, unconditionally, job action taken by HEU workers.

In this era of war and occupation, we have seen both military and legislative attacks against oppressed people globally. As a coalition that fights for the rights of oppressed people under attack by imperialism in Iraq, Palestine, Afghanistan and Haiti, we must also fight back when the Canadian and BC government's attack oppressed people here. No imperialist attack abroad is without attacks at home. The BC HEU has taken the

important step of the workers fight to the next level and is playing an important role of leadership for all poor and working people in BC.

Mobilization Against War and Occupation is supporting the BC HEU in solidarity with their fight. We are encouraging our supporters and members to support as well as the struggle of the HEU is the struggle of all poor and working people, from Canada, to Iraq, to Palestine, to Haiti, to Afghanistan. We must unify the fight at home and abroad and mobilize in solidarity with the HEU on April 25th when strike action is taken. We will be with you on the picket line. Through unity we will gain strength and through united action we will succeed!

In Solidarity,

Shannon Bundock and Kira Koshelanyk  
Co-Chairs  
Mobilization Against War and Occupation

# War, Occupation, and Labour

## Iraqi Workers The Backbone of Resistance

By Shannon Bundock

*“On 6th December 2003, US troops raided IFTU’s [Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions] temporary headquarters (the Transport & Communication Union offices) and arrested 8 IFTU leaders who were subsequently released without charge. However the offices have been vandalised and closed down by the US troops and remain locked out of use.”* –Abdullah Muhsin, London Representative of the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions

Under the US-led occupation independent union organizing is illegal in Iraq. Organizers are beaten and shot. Workers demonstrations are attacked and dozens are arrested. The US Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), headed by Paul Bremer, refuses to negotiate with unions, refuses to respond to their demands and in particular refuses to recognize the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions.

Despite these conditions, despite the fatal threats facing them, Iraqi workers have established a nation-wide union federation. Dozens of unions have been established and they are constantly on the streets in action to improve the lives of Iraqi people and to gain sovereignty.

**Why US Cannot and Will Not Respond**

**in the Interest of Iraqi People**

From the economic interventions of the US so far, their interests and agenda are clear. Iraqi companies and workers are repeatedly denied contracts to rebuild infrastructure, and American corporations are given primary control over bids for “reconstruction”. According to reports, 138 of 600 state-owned enterprises have already been offered for sale. Currently, the American Betchel Corporation is in charge of the Railway sector. The CPA has now published Order No. 39, which allows for 100% foreign ownership of businesses, except the oil industry. In early September, the CPA designed Order No. 30 on Salaries and Employment Conditions, which Paul Bremer signed. This Order cancels all previous state subsidies for public sector workers such as family, housing, location, and risk benefits. This proves that according to the occupying forces, stabilizing the political situation in Iraq means opening up contracts for Western owned companies. This shift in the Iraqi economy in the favour of US interests is inherently against the interests of the Iraqi people.

In reality, stability is a distant goal for the occupation forces. The process of privatization in Iraq is being met with fervent opposition across the country. Those who have jobs in Iraq predict that



Women workers protest in demand of backpay in Baghdad, April 2004.

the selling off of Iraq’s resources and industry will mean job losses, pay cuts and the deterioration of living standards. This prediction has roots in the realities of millions of poor and working people across

the globe who face layoffs, wage rollbacks and loss of benefits when the neo-liberal agenda of privatization is implemented.

**Unemployment and Poverty**

“The problems they face are immense; between 50%-70% unemployment; rampant inflation; a deteriorating security situation; infrastructure in ruins; not to mention the illegal occupation of their country by the US/UK who are busy trying to impose a neo-liberal economic agenda which no Iraqi ever voted for.” – Alex Gordon National Union of Rail, Maritime & Transport Workers, RMT (UK)

The Iraqi people are faced with completely unreliable and inadequate electricity service, no consistent access to clean water and skeletal, at best basic, social services. The majority of schools remain closed, hospitals are in crisis, and workers have no stability or job security. In conditions where many people cannot leave their homes for fear of being arrested, shot and/or killed, normal working life is crippled and incredible poverty dominates the lives of both employed and unemployed Iraqis.

*“The CPA administered ration (previously supervised by the UN’s World Food Programme) is what most Iraqi families still survive on. The ration, worked out at 250 ID (12c) per person, per month, consists of rice, flour, pulses, cooking oil, tea, sugar, and fluctuating amounts of powdered milk. Without the ration, families simply wouldn’t survive. As it is, malnutrition and anemia are rife. Eight hundred thousand children under five years old are chronically malnourished...”* – Ewa Jasiewicz. Occupation Watch, Baghdad

Seven to eight million Iraqi people are unemployed. Those who do have jobs have no guarantee of how long those jobs will last, or even if they will be paid. Under the Coalition Provisional Authority, bonuses, profit sharing and housing subsidies that once helped Iraqi workers survive on substandard wages, have vanished. In combination with the rising cost of imports, most workers have sunk deeper into poverty.

**Workers Under Attack**

“When we talked to the manager, he told us he had to talk to the oil ministry, which had

## Striking to save the Public Sector in Newfoundland

### From British Columbia to Newfoundland: Labour and Unions in Motion

By Ivan Drury

*“Although it’s a cold day, it’s not as cold as the blood that pumps through Danny Williams’ heart.”* – CUPE Newfoundland President, Wayne Lucas

In Newfoundland and Labrador on April 1<sup>st</sup>, 20,000 public employees went out on strike in the largest public sector strike in Newfoundland’s history. There are important similarities between this major strike that ended (for now) just as the major HEU strike in BC is beginning. The two major similarities are the reason that this strike is important for working people and unionists in BC: these similarities are the forces of the ruling class against the forces of working people.

**The Ruling Class Attacks...**

The Tory government under Danny Williams in Labrador-Newfoundland took power in order to manage for the ruling class the same capitalist crisis that Gordon Campbell rose to manage in BC. Williams immediately set his radar on the public sector as the place to begin his attack on unions and poor people in Newfoundland-Labrador.

When he first came to power, Premier Williams said, “I wouldn’t be having major cuts in the public sector.”

On March 30<sup>th</sup>, the contracts expired for both the Newfoundland and Labrador Union of Public and Private Employees (NAPE) and the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). Danny Williams announced the cutting of 4,000 jobs from the public sector and massive roll backs.

**The Workers Fight Back!**

The most important thing to note from this struggle is the fact that there was a struggle: the workers fought back.

The day after the massive cuts to public services was announced, including lost jobs, frozen wages and cuts to sick leave for future employees, both NAPE and CUPE demanded a 21% pay raise over a three year period and 21,000 workers walked off the job.

Although essential services were maintained, such a broad range of public sector workers went out on strike that the struggle demanded massive support from other working and poor people to survive. Emergency Air Services, Collage of the North Atlantic Support Staff, General Services, Health Professionals, Hospital Support Staff, Lab and X-Ray Technicians, Marine and Operational Services, Marine Services, School Boards, Liquor Corporation and School Assistants all went out on strike at the same time and stayed out for a full month.

The ability to fight against the reactionary cuts of the P.C. government was dependant on both solidarity amongst all of these under attack and solidarity from workers in other unions, non-union workers and poor people dependant on the services these workers provide.

**Back to Work Order**

After a month of stalemate, with the Province refusing to negotiate any of the points with the unions and refusing to compromise, Danny Williams introduced an incredibly punitive back to work legislation. The legislation includes the firing of any worker who refuses to return to the job and the fining

of any union leader who encourages staying off the job \$25,000 a day and any union that does the same \$25,000 a day.

**Coast to Coast Solidarity**

This legislation was introduced into the Newfoundland legislature on Monday April 26<sup>th</sup>, the first full day of the HEU strike in BC. The strikers went back to work in Newfoundland on April 28<sup>th</sup>, and the defiance of the back to work order in BC began on the 29<sup>th</sup>. The strike that began in Newfoundland on April 1<sup>st</sup> by public sector workers under attack from a profit driven government is continuing in BC by the same workers under attack by the exact same forces.

Bill 18 in Newfoundland has been postponed until Monday May 3<sup>rd</sup>, so that negotiation can continue over the weekend; and the fighters in Newfoundland are not out of steam. On Mayday this year, with poor and working people from Vancouver to St. Johns to Baghdad all in life or death struggle against the destructive forces of capitalism and imperialism, we must remember that the principle of solidarity still stands. An injury to one is an injury to all. Also, that each victory can strengthen us all.

The strongest show of solidarity to NAPE and CUPE on the East Coast from BC is to continue the fight against the same attacks being carried out against us. From coast to coast in this country, and all around the world, we must fight with the same courage, strength and solidarity as working people in Newfoundland have shown in their massive month long battle.

Continued on page 6

# Support Iraqi Workers!

From page 5

to talk to the finance ministry, which had to get permission from the coalition forces. The coalition forces control the finances - and our wages." - Detrala Beshab, president of the Al Daura refinery's new union.

As Iraqi workers face military attacks, arbitrary raids of homes and workplaces and mass killing at the hands of Coalition forces, they also face an occupier that controls every aspect of their working lives. The Iraqi people have no illusions about who is responsible for their desperate situation, as any attempt to organize for improvements in working conditions are met with American and British bullets. Because of the US/UK's drastic approach, Iraqi working people are becoming the central force of resistance to the occupation.

It is clear that there will be no improvement in the situation until Iraq, as a nation, gains some level of stability. Beyond that it is also clear, that as long as the Iraqi people are focusing all their energy on fighting against occupation, there will be no stability for Iraq without self-determination.

## How Iraqi people are responding

Iraqi resistance to occupation means many things. Currently (in April) it means 50-70 armed attacks on US troops everyday. It means hundreds of thousands of angry people in the street. It means refusal to surrender to the criminal occupation. It means workers defying all CPA laws that cripple their organizing.

On March 16 2003, in the main office of the Transport Union in Baghdad, a meeting was attended by about 400 trade unionists. The meeting formed the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU) and elected a National Committee.

According to a press release issued by the Federation:

*"Since then [the March 16<sup>th</sup> meeting] the following unions have been established: the Oil and Gas Union, the Railway Union, the Vegetable Oil and Food Staff Union, The Transport Union, the Textile Union, the Leather Products Union, the*

*Construction and Carpentry Union, the Transport and Communication Union, the Electrician and Municipalities Union, the Printing Union, the Mechanics' Union, the Service Industry Union and the Agriculture and Irrigation Workers Union.*

These unions organize in Baghdad, Basra, Mosul, Wasset, Dyla, Kurbala, Al Najif, Babel and Mesan."

The release continued on to outline the conditions facing organizers and workers:

*"...The task of building a new movement is a difficult one. Some of these difficulties derive from the occupation and its martial laws, high unemployment due to disruption of the production cycle, but also as a result of lack of funds. The new movement faces shortages of transport, communication equipment and basic office facilities. No union officials are paid. And the movement's money is still frozen in banks."*

The Federation was established on basic demands for workers rights: encouraging the increased role of women in unions, paying special attention to the social and economic needs of disabled people and most importantly focusing on "a new democratic trade union movement actively involved in influencing economic and social policies and rebuilding civil society, together with other social movements."

Fighting for these demands has been faced with incredible suppression by the US. All demands to repeal laws making unionizing illegal are simply met with no comment and no response from the CPA.

Unable to enter into collective bargaining, unable to legally negotiate wages and working conditions, Iraqi unions are paralysed. As more businesses and industries fall into the hands of foreign corporations, Iraqi workers are laid off and have no legal way of holding employers accountable.

As the war of occupation continues, Iraqi workers understand that their fight primarily lies in combating the occupation. The goals of the IFTU clearly cannot be met unless the people of Iraq gain control of their government.

This has meant the unification of demands for wages with demands for sovereignty.

"...what we will have a total shut down of, is exports...One of our assumptions is that soldiers will occupy the pumps. If they do, we will fight them. We will resist them with force. And we will join the armed resistance." - Hassan Jum'a head of the Southern Oil Company Union.

*The resistance movement in Iraq is a broad and popular movement. It is made up of millions of Iraqi people, and the majority of those millions are poor and working Iraqis. As a result the budding trade union movement holds a strategic position within the resistance movement. Organizing together to improve the position of the Iraqi working class means unifying with the main fight of the Iraqi people: the fight against occupation.*

## Labour Union Under Attack

**Of course, a successful union movement, a movement that is part of beating back imperialism, is also a movement facing tremendous threats and challenges. Beyond the simple refusal to recognize unions, the CPA has actively attacked demonstrations, arrested organizers, raided homes and workplaces and fired on and killed many active workers.**

A major example of the attacks by occupation forces was the Dec 6<sup>th</sup> raid on IFTU headquarters. According to a press statement from the IFTU on Dec 8<sup>th</sup> *"The American occupation forces, using a force of about ten armoured cars and tens of soldiers, attacked the temporary headquarters of the IFTU...and arrested 8 of its leaders and cadres, who were handcuffed and taken away to an unknown destination."*

Since that time there has been no explanation of the raid, no apology and no compensation, despite statements of condemnation from labour organizations across the globe, including the International Labour Organization (ILO).

In addition to such high profile attacks, the day-to-day life of workers is characterized by instability and fear. With demonstrations and pickets being organized frequently, Iraqi workers know that participating means they could face arrest, detention and imprisonment for unknown periods of time.

What is clear is that the US occupation forces have not responded lightly to the development of trade union organizing in Iraq. They know that the strongest threat that they face is a unified Iraqi working class. Poor and working people fighting for their rights in Iraq means Iraqis fighting to drive occupiers out. The US wouldn't bother to pay heed to the workers movement if it weren't for two things: one, the Iraqi workers represent the broadest section of the population and the most important layer economically and two, their resistance to occupation is gaining ground.

## International Anti-war Movement Must Support Iraqi Workers and Echo Their Demands

We must learn from the Iraqi trade union movement. We must follow the leadership of poor and working people in Iraq and unite the struggles of workers everywhere by understanding our common interests. Working people in Iraq are demanding an end to occupation as the primary step forward in their fight for their rights. Understanding and solidarity leads to strengthening the global anti-war movement with workers from all over the world.

Unionizing in Iraq opens the opportunity to build solidarity with poor and working people all across the world. Strengthening connections and solidarity between working people globally can put real and effective pressure on imperialist nations. As support of the Iraqi resistance to occupation develops in the US, working people are able to attack the US government from another front. Pressure from the anti-war movement, with major involvement of labour unions means weakening the position of US imperialism overall.

As poor and working people, as a union members, as people opposed to war and occupation we must unite behind the struggle of Iraqi workers, which is the struggle of oppressed people everywhere. STOP THE ATTACKS ON IRAQI UNIONS! END ATTACKS ON WORKERS AT HOME AND ABROAD! US UK OUT OF IRAQ!

# Movimiento Fire This Time Por Justicia Social - Bases de Unidad

La humanidad es amenazada hoy por guerra, crisis económicas, el hambre, la pobreza y el crimen: todos creados por el impulso capitalista por maximizar sus beneficios a expensas de la gente del mundo. Para oponernos a cada uno de estos crímenes contra la humanidad, debemos enfocar todo nuestro trabajo y acción para construir los cimientos para avanzar nuestros intereses en una amplia lucha contra el capital internacional, sus herramientas de división de la clase obrera y sus instituciones locales. El principio fundamental del Movimiento Fire This Time por Justicia Social es la unidad y la solidaridad activa de todos los pobres y gente de trabajo, local e internacionalmente. Debemos reconocer que este principio no tendría sentido sin una lucha activa porque la búsqueda de este principio es agudamente contraria al interés de la clase predominante, los cuales utilizarán todos los medios a su

disposición para mantenernos divididos y hostiles entre nosotros mismos.

Fire This Time es una organización política basada en la acción y comprometida a construir poder social y político de la gente pobre y de trabajo en British Columbia. Creemos que la única manera de desafiar con eficacia y amenazar al gobierno y su agenda corporativa es con la organización de masas de gente activa en lugares de trabajo y en las calles. Estamos dedicados a movilizar y a unificar a gente pobre y de trabajo contra el Gobierno Liberal, sus legislaciones y políticas en contra de los pobres y trabajadores. Estamos comprometidos a organizar con trabajadores y gente pobre de las comunidades más atacadas y explotadas del Lower Mainland y más allá: comunidades de gente de color, inmigrantes, refugiados, "illegales", trabajadores de bajo-salario, gente lisiada, homosexuales, comunidades indígenas, gente

desempleada y familias de bajos ingresos. Nos oponemos a todas las formas de opresión y de explotación: desde sexismo al racismo, de la homofobia al colonialismo y a el resto de instituciones, de pensamiento, de creencia, de acciones y de los comportamientos que humille y degrade a gente para crear hostilidad y división entre nosotros.

La meta del Movimiento Fire This Time por Justicia Social es construir un amplio movimiento de base para derrotar al gobierno Liberal de BC. Nuestro trabajo es proporcionar las herramientas necesarias para unificar y para activar a la clase obrera en BC., para construir un movimiento amplio de base, fuerte y eficaz para oponernos a los Liberales de BC. y sus ataques contra la gente pobre y trabajadores. Este movimiento debe ser integrado en el contexto revolucionario más amplio de la lucha internacional contra el capitalismo e imperialismo; aunque nos

enfoquemos principalmente en política local, esencialmente el alcance de nuestro trabajo es internacionalista. El apoyo a las luchas de la gente oprimida en otros países debilita la hegemonía y el poder de la clase capitalista en otras tierras y por lo tanto debilita su mando local, ayudando así en las batallas de la gente oprimida en Canadá. Además, la práctica de la solidaridad internacional solidifica la cooperación, esencial en la construcción de un movimiento del mundo por justicia social. La agenda del Gobierno Liberal es parte de un programa de reestructuración global conocido como neo-liberalismo. Luchar a los Liberales de BC. es luchar contra el neo-liberalismo y capitalismo global. Debemos ampliarnos en esto, implícita y explícitamente para hacer las conexiones relevantes a nuestras domésticas luchas diarias, para superar la división geográfica, y dejar en claro que cuando participamos en la lucha, no luchamos solos, sino

junto a millones de trabajadores y de gente pobre alrededor del mundo. En la globalización capitalista - imperialista no hay lucha local que no tenga un carácter internacional. Cada internacional es local y cada local es internacional.

El Movimiento Fire This Time por Justicia Social apoyará y trabajará con otros movimientos y luchas progresivas ya sea por demandas inmediatas o a largo plazo, localmente, nacionalmente e internacionalmente. Nuestra meta principal es abolir la pobreza e injusticia por medio de educación, participación y acción directa. Intentamos alcanzar un nivel colectivo de conciencia que permita a la gente oprimida, pensar socialmente y actuar políticamente para alcanzar justicia social por cualesquiera sean los medios necesarios.

- Translated by Claudio Ekdahl



**In defense of the Cuban Revolution!**  
*An evening of film and of*  
**SOLIDARITY.**



Please come and listen to an up-to-date report on the recent developments in Cuba by Amigos De Cuba and Free the Cuban Five Committee.

This update will be followed by two documentaries:

1) ENDING THE COLD WAR FREEZE IN CUBA  
 The US policy towards Cuba after the end of the Cold war. The film also portraits the readiness of the Cuban people to defend their country, their sovereignty and Revolution from any kind of US aggressions at any cost.

2) THE WORLD STOPPED WATCHING  
 An interesting new film on the aftermath of the Nicaraguan Revolution and the role and psychological manipulation of the western media on international conflicts.

**Friday**  
**May 21st**

**@ SFU HARBOUR CTR @ 7:00 PM**  
 Room 1900, 515 West Hastings, Vancouver - doors open at 6:30 PM-

Suggested donation: \$ 5.00

Presented by Amigos De Cuba and Free the Cuban Five Committee

For information please call 604-432-7400 or 604-435-7373 [brigade@ven.bc.ca](mailto:brigade@ven.bc.ca)

For more information on upcoming MAWO events and activities check out

[www.mawovancouver.org](http://www.mawovancouver.org)

Part of Mayworks 2004,  
**A Workshop Presented by**  
**Fire This Time Movement for Social Justice**



Art is a way of communication. The art of class struggle is the highest and the most profound communication of masses of oppressed people in motion and it is the creative communication of people for social change. How the masses in Iran learned and exercised the art of class struggle to achieve one of the most popular revolution in the 20th century. Why revolution is the result of the art of class struggle. An eyewitness account by Ali Yerevani, a participant & organizer in the Iranian Revolution.

**Sat May 1st, 3 pm - 5pm**  
**Wise Hall (1882 Adanac@Victoria)**

**Fire This Time Movement for Social Justice**

[www.fire-this-time.org](http://www.fire-this-time.org) | 604.322.1764 | [info@fire-this-time.org](mailto:info@fire-this-time.org)

**Mobilization Against War and Occupation**

Presents

**Anti-War Anti-Occupation**  
**Conference**

**BUILDING**

**A MOVEMENT**

for

**SELF**

**DETERMINATION**

**In Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine, Haiti,**  
**and Indigenous Nations in Canada**

**THE ANTIWAR**  
**MOVEMENT:**

**What we've learned, What we've**  
**achieved, and Where we are going**

**MAY**  
**15<sup>th</sup>**

**12noon - 5PM Britannia Center (1661 Nanier @ Commercial Dr.)**

[mawovancouver.org](http://mawovancouver.org) · [mawoinfo@yahoo.ca](mailto:mawoinfo@yahoo.ca) · (604) 322 - 1764

**\*BACK TO THE STREETS! DAY OF ACTION!**  
**SELF DETERMINATION!**

**US/UK OUT OF IRAQ!**  
**ISRAEL OUT OF PALESTINE!**  
**CANADA OUT OF AFGHANISTAN!**  
**CANADA /FRANCE/US OUT OF HAITI!**  
**SOVEREIGNTY FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLE**  
**IN CANADA!**

**MAY 29** 1 pm. Vancouver Art Gallery  
**ORGANIZED BY:**  
**MOBILIZATION AGAINST WAR AND OCCUPATION**

[www.mawovancouver.org](http://www.mawovancouver.org)  
[mawoinfo@yahoo.ca](mailto:mawoinfo@yahoo.ca)

**RALLY & MARCH**



**Please Donate to the**  
**Fire This Time Newspaper!**

Fire This Time receives no sustained funding, and we rely on donations from supporters to keep this newspaper going.

Please forward any donations to: PO Box 21607  
 Vancouver BC  
 V5L 5G3