

# CUPE and MGEU nix Manitoba healthcare support workers strike after announcing last-minute tentative agreement

Niles Niemuth  
9 October 2024

The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and the Manitoba Government and General Employees' Union (MGEU) called off an impending strike Tuesday by 25,000 healthcare support workers across the province of Manitoba after announcing a tentative agreement without providing any concrete details to workers. The strike would have pitted the low-paid workers against the provincial New Democratic Party (NDP) government, which in spite of pledges to improve the public health care system is enforcing strict budgetary and wage restraint.

Healthcare aides, laundry workers, dietary aides, ward clerks, recreation coordinators, maintenance, housekeeping and other support staff were set to hit the picket lines at 6 a.m. Tuesday, before an announcement came that an agreement had been reached at 4:25 a.m. and that the strike had been “postponed” pending the results of a ratification vote.

Healthcare support workers have been working under a seven-year contract which expired in March. Workers at Winnipeg Regional Health Authority, Shared Health and Southern Health were in a position to strike after rejecting a tentative agreement in July. That agreement, which CUPE recommended to its members, would have seen wages increase by just under 13 percent compounded over four years.

Just hours before announcing the latest tentative agreement, CUPE and MGEU bureaucrats had been insisting that they remained far apart in talks with the union-backed government of NDP Premier Wab Kinew and that a strike was likely. The sudden announcement of a deal is a sure sign that the union tops have capitulated to the main demands of the employers, including on wages. Health care support workers in Manitoba are among the lowest paid in Canada, earning on average \$3 less per hour than any other province.

Workers reacted with skepticism on CUPE Local 204's Facebook page, with one remarking, “Hopefully it isn't the same deal with a signing bonus slapped on top.” Another worker wrote, “We need a significant percentage if a contract is for 4-5 years. We need at least a 25%-30% to really cover inflation etc.”

CUPE and MGEU are both recommending that workers

accept the deal and will be presenting “highlights” in information sessions before the contract vote.

“Thank you to all members for your support, strength, and solidarity throughout this process. Your mobilization and action helped to achieve a tentative agreement that will see significant improvements to your wages and working conditions,” the CUPE Manitoba bargaining team declared in a statement posted to Facebook.

“We put in the effort and so did the employers and CUPE and we managed to find a tentative agreement that we believe our members will be really happy when they see it,” MGEU President Kyle Ross told CTV News. In the next breath, he admitted that it would not in fact meet workers' needs, noting that the tentative agreement was a “first step” in recruiting and retaining workers.

Premier Kinew welcomed the announcement of a tentative agreement, telling reporters, “We said that we were going to give you a good deal, that we were going to staff up the health-care system and that we're going to do work on mileage and we're delivering on those things.”

Last month, Kinew announced that his government would be implementing financial restraint after the suspension of the provincial fuel tax eliminated \$340 million in government income. His aim is to keep spending growth under 2.5 percent annually—a real terms cut when inflation and population growth are taken into account—making clear that he has no intention of providing significant wage increases to health care workers. “It is a challenge that we have to consider all these different variables, like who deserves what kind of raise, what health-care investment do we need to make (and) when, where do we need to tighten the belts,” Kinew declared.

When he won election last year, Kinew was hailed as a “progressive” primarily on the basis of his identity as the First Nations premier. In an article on the eve of the election, the Canadian Labour Congress, a key ally of the warmongering, pro-genocide Trudeau federal Liberal government and Canada's largest trade union federation, enthused over the “optimistic and progressive ideas Wab Kinew and the NDP have brought to this election campaign.”

Kinew promised at the time that his NDP government would fix the province's struggling healthcare system. This has included a plan to hire 1,000 healthcare workers by the end of this year. So far the province has added 873 new workers, including 116 physicians, 304 nurses, 290 health-care aides and 87 in allied health. Tuesday's tentative agreement makes clear that Kinew and the NDP are determined to keep health care workers earning poverty wages, whether or not they meet their hiring targets.

The province faces the second worst deficit of doctors per capita, with just 215 doctors per 100,000 residents. The Canadian Institute for Health Information estimated in 2023 that Manitoba would need 445 more physicians to reach the national average. Meanwhile, Doctors Manitoba reported that more than half of all doctors are considering retiring, moving their practice to another province or cutting back hours.

The situation is equally dire for overtaxed healthcare support workers, with nearly half reporting in a recent CUPE Manitoba survey that they were looking to leave the profession.

A report by the MGEU, which has 6,500 members involved in the current contract negotiations, noted that the previously rejected offer would have kept healthcare aids at the bottom of pay nationally.

Healthcare support workers in Manitoba are the worst paid among the 10 provinces in Canada, with a starting wage for most classifications just over \$17 an hour. A survey by CUPE Manitoba found that 1 in 16 workers rely on foodbanks to get by, while 1 in 9 has experienced housing insecurity. With the surge in inflation in recent years, this means that the monthly income of an individual healthcare worker in Winnipeg, the province's capital and largest city, is entirely consumed by the cost of housing, food, transport and other essentials, with nothing left over for emergencies.

While Kinew continues to be presented as a progressive in the media and by the union bureaucracy which backs him, he has also been praised by Pierre Poilievre, the far-right leader of the Conservatives.

After a meeting at the provincial legislature in March, Poilievre hailed Kinew for their common opposition to the national carbon tax, a limited, market based measure aimed at curbing greenhouse gas emissions implemented by the Liberal Trudeau government. The opposition leader and his party have made opposition to the tax a central plank of their far-right populist campaign for government.

"He's focused on making energy more affordable. So he has said he wants to exempt Manitoba from the carbon tax, and I agree with that. I want to exempt everyone from the carbon tax," Poilievre declared. He concluded, "I'm obviously a Conservative, he's obviously a New Democrat, but that doesn't mean we can't share our priorities and have good conversations together. So I think it was a good meeting."

As he cozies up to Poilievre, Kinew has been among the most forthright in backing Canada's military buildup and

preparations for war against Russia and China.

At a meeting of premiers in July, he demanded that the federal government set a four-year timeline to meet NATO's target of spending 2 percent of GDP on the military, rather than the eight years envisioned by Trudeau. "I'm encouraging the federal government to move more quickly," he told reporters. "I think the timeline we have to think about is the next administration, whoever that may be, in the United States of America. So let's hit that target in the next four years with a credible plan to do so."

At the same meeting, he offered up Manitoba as "the Costco of critical minerals" needed to build up the military-industrial complex and boost profits for big business.

Kinew's positions are in keeping with those of the federal NDP. Leader Jagmeet Singh entered a confidence-and-supply agreement with Trudeau in March 2022, just a month after the US-instigated Russian invasion of Ukraine. Singh insisted it was necessary to provide "political stability" for the ruling class, creating the conditions for the minority Liberal government to funnel billions of dollars of weaponry to the far-right regime in Kiev and use inflation, high interest rates and state strikebreaking to impose a significant cut in real wages on working people.

Although Singh ended this agreement in August for electoral reasons, his party continues to strongly support the war on Russia. The NDP has also backed Israel's genocide against the Palestinians in Gaza, including expelling Ontario MPP Sarah Jama from the NDP's provincial parliamentary caucus because she accused the Zionist regime of carrying out apartheid. With regard to the US-led preparations for war with China in the Asia-Pacific, the NDP has repeatedly denounced the Trudeau government's supposed failure to take a more hardline stance, which has often seen the party in alignment with Poilievre's Tories.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**