



October 19, 2023

I'm here this morning to bring greetings to you on behalf of all the other workers and unions who are members of the Alberta Federation of Labour.

For years now, one of UNA's slogans has been "by your side, on your side."

You live by that motto with the patients you care for every day. You also live by that motto as partners and participants in the Alberta labour movement.

Picket lines. Rallies. Campaigns. Schools. Town hall events. Marches. Whenever other workers have needed support and solidarity, you've been there.

By our side. On our side.

Your leadership, your friendship and your solidarity have helped make our feisty little labour movement into a real force to be reckoned with in this province.

We literally couldn't do what we do ... or be who we are ... without you.

Neither our province, nor our health care system nor our provincial labour movement could function without you.

So thank you...from the bottom of our hearts.

But I'm here this morning to do more than say thank you.

I'm also here to make a very important announcement.

Yesterday, Prime Minister Trudeau sent a strongly-worded letter to our Premier, Danielle Smith, addressing her proposal to pull Alberta out of the Canada Pension Plan.

In his letter, the Prime Minister said that CPP has been the cornerstone of retirement security for all Canadians, including all Albertans, for nearly 60 years.

He said that withdrawing from CPP would expose both Albertans and other Canadians to unacceptable levels of risk and insecurity when it comes to their retirement incomes.

He said the harm that the Smith government's plan would cause Canadians is undeniable.

And he said he would not stand by while anyone, including the Premier of Alberta, seeks to weaken the pensions and reduce the retirement income of Canadians, including Albertans.

As a life-long Albertan and the elected president of Alberta's largest worker organization, I welcome the Prime Minister's comments and, like most of you in the hall today, I share his sentiments.

I'm also pleased to hear that he will be directing his ministers to make sure that Albertans – and all Canadians – are made fully aware of the risks associated with the Alberta government's proposal.

All of this is welcome. And it's timely.

However ... this morning I want to make one thing crystal clear. Alberta needs a robust campaign to promote the value of remaining in the Canada Pension Plan.

But that campaign cannot and should not be led by Prime Minister Trudeau.

That would play right into Danielle Smith's hands.

She WANTS a fight with Justin Trudeau – and she's willing to play politics with our pensions to get it.

But just because Danielle Smith wants to frame this as a fight with Ottawa doesn't mean we have to grant her wish.

She may want to "own the Libs" – but what we want is to protect our pensions and our retirement security.

And that goal – protecting the retirement security of Albertans – is much, much more important than Danielle Smith’s political games.

So, we need a “remain” campaign – a campaign to keep Alberta in the Canada Pension Plan.

And that campaign needs to come from Alberta, not Ottawa.

It needs to be Albertans who lead the charge.

It needs to be Albertans who debunk the myths and challenge the lies.

It needs to be Albertans who push back and defend our own retirement security.

This morning, after robust conversations with all of our unions, including UNA, I am proud to announce that Alberta workers, through our unions and through the Alberta Federation of Labour, will step up the plate.

We will organize the Remain campaign that Albertans have been waiting for!

If not us, who?

If not now, when?

To be clear, what I'm announcing today is not just a union campaign – it's a campaign for all Albertans who reject the Smith government's scheme to pull us out of CPP.

We in the Alberta labour movement don't have deep pockets like the Smith government.

We don't have departments full of government staffers to mobilize. We don't have millions of dollars in taxpayers money to pay for endless ads.

But we CAN get the ball rolling on a campaign to protect our pensions. We DO have enough resources to set up a website and other basic campaign infrastructure.

We DO have the wherewithal to hold meetings for concerned Albertans. And we DO have the inclination to act as a catalyst and as a convenor. Most importantly, we have the truth. The truth to counter their lies and their misleading snake-oil salesmanship masquerading as consultation. And the truth will prevail!

So, starting tomorrow morning, we will send letters ... to municipal leaders, to seniors groups, to student groups, to community groups ... and, yes, to Alberta businesses and business groups.

Then we're going to put out a general call to concerned Albertans in every corner of this province – from north to south and from east to west.

We're going to ask them to join us in creating a campaign to balance the debate and stand up for our pensions.

At this point, I don't know exactly what the campaign will look like. But the main point is that there will BE a campaign. We'll make sure of that.

Our approach will be like the famous line out of the 1980s movie Field of Dreams: "Build it and they will come."

We will build it. And Albertans will come. We are confident of that. What will our campaign say to Albertans?

Well, first and foremost, we'll say that the Smith government is selling Albertans a dangerous and misleading bill of goods.

We'll say there's no way that a province with 12 percent of the population will get 53 percent of money in the CPP fund.

We'll say that without that big fantasy transfer of funds touted by the UCP, there's no way our premiums will be \$1425 lower per year than they are with CPP. In fact there's every reason to believe that an APP will cost more and deliver less. It will certainly be riskier – and that's the last thing you want with a pension plan that suppose to guarantee your retirement income.

We'll also point out that the Smith government's own report acknowledges that the advantage conferred by Alberta's younger population is already disappearing and that our demographics are

expected to converge with the rest of Canada within only a few years. This will also make it impossible for the Smith government to deliver on their promise of lower premiums and higher benefits.

But that's not all. We'll also ask the Smith government tough questions. Like, will an Alberta Pension Plan be fully indexed for inflation like the CPP? Will the 50 percent benefit increase that's currently being phased in to CPP also be part of an APP, or will Albertans miss out? In addition, we'll make sure Albertans hear some hard truths about the Smith government's plan.

Like the fact that pulling out of CPP would be an irreversible decision. Like the fact that other provinces do NOT have to agree to make an APP portable across the country.

Like the fact that no one would be exempt – all current retirees would be swept into the APP. No one in this room would ever receive CPP – all of us would be forced into the APP, whether we have four years left until retirement or 40.

Our campaign will say all these things. We will give voice to the concerns of ordinary Albertans. And we will remind people that the most appropriate thing for them to say when faced by the outrageous nonsense coming from the government is "hand off my CPP!"

So, stay tuned. The "remain" campaign is coming.

Full disclosure: we are going to be asking you to chip in, both individually and collectively. We'll need money for meetings. For organizers. And, yes, for ads.

This is a fight we can't and won't shrink from. And it's a fight we're going to win. And it starts right here. Say it with me: "Hands off my pension!" "Hands off my CPP!"

(Pause)

I can't leave the stage today without mentioning one other issue: bargaining.

As Heather noted in her opening address, collective agreements covering 250,000 Alberta workers will expire early in the new year.

That's an unprecedented number ... and it includes almost everyone in this room.

UNA will be at the bargaining table. HSAA will be at the bargaining table. AUPE will be at the bargaining table. The Alberta Teachers Association will be at the bargaining table. And unions at our post-secondary institutions will be at the bargaining table.

As negotiations commence there will be both threats and opportunities. Let's start with the opportunities.

The last time you bargained, the government had big deficits. This time they have big surpluses.

The last time you bargained, the government was trying to convince the Albertans that we had too many public sector workers and that they were all paid too much.

This time, everyone knows that we have huge staff shortages. We're short 3,000 nurses. We're short 3,000 teachers. We're short 1,500 paramedics. Wherever you look, there are worker shortages. And they're getting worse, not better.

At the same time, inflation has increased by more than 15 percent over the past three years.

Alberta has seen the biggest increases in power costs in the country. We have also seen the fastest increase in housing costs.

University of Calgary economist Trevor Tombe put it in stark terms earlier this week. By his calculations, costs for Alberta families have increased between \$600 and \$1000 ... each month. Not per year, per month.

In this environment – characterized by crippling staff shortages and brutal inflation – there is no way that any reasonable person could oppose substantial wage increases for Alberta workers, including nurses.

The bottom line is that the best way to help workers deal with rising costs is to make sure their wages keep up with inflation. And the best way to respect, retain and recruit workers like nurses who are in short

supply is to make sure that they get wage and benefits increases that EXCEED inflation.

The good news is that this logic is playing out in other provinces and other sectors. Workers have leverage and they're using it.

For example, Unifor members at Ford and GM just won wage increases of 20-25 percent over three years, plus cost of living adjustments and four to ten thousand dollar signing bonuses.

The BC Nurses won increase of over 15 percent over three years, plus cost of living adjustments and a \$750 million fund to reduce nurse-patient ratios.

Here in Alberta, our construction trades, led by the AFL-affiliated Operating Engineers and Boilermakers, negotiated increases of 16 percent over two years, plus cost of living adjustments and pension improvements.

All of this bodes well for you as pursue your three Rs: respect, retention and recruitment.

But here's the bad news: common sense isn't really common within the ranks of our UCP government.

Instead of acknowledging the need for raises, the UCP is doubling down cuts and freezes.

How is the government setting itself up for conflict with you and other public sector workers?

Let me count the ways.

First, they've put nothing in the budget for raises. While virtually every employer on the planet is acknowledging that wage increases are in order during these inflationary times, the UCP seems to think they can defy the economic laws of gravity.

Second, they have promised a \$1 billion income tax cut, which would disproportionately benefit the wealthy. That's money that could and should be available to help show you the respect at the bargaining table that you deserve. But it won't be there.

Third, they've adopted what they call a new "fiscal framework" which says that at least half of all surpluses have to be used to pay down debt -- and they say the other half must be deposited in a slush fund called the Alberta Fund. That will leave nothing for bargaining with 250,000 workers.

Fourth, they've announced their plan to introduce legislation this fall that that will prohibit the government from raising taxes unless those increases are approved by Albertans through a referendum.

Basically, what they're trying to do is set up a situation where they can claim that the cupboard is bare, even though it was they, themselves, who have deliberately made the cupboard bare.

This is the ultimate goal of the whole conservative ultra-low tax project.

At some point, the taxes are so low that we can no longer afford to fund basic services. Despite the fact that we are the wealthiest province in the country by every measure, that's where we are.

We don't raise enough revenue to properly staff our services or cover the wage increases we need to remain competitive.

So, while you're going head to head with the government at the bargaining table, we at the AFL will be attempting to help create winning conditions for you by running a big public campaign this coming winter to remind voters about inflation and explain why substantial wage increases are needed to retain and recruit workers into our vital public services.

We're also going to try to bring the unions together to see if we can coordinate at least some of our actions, similar to what unions did in Ontario during the education support workers strike and what unions in Quebec are currently doing in advance of their public sector bargaining season.

Because that's what we do in the labour movement. We come together. We negotiate with employers and with each other. We collaborate. We take collective action. And we win.

We're going to do that on pensions. We're going to do that on bargaining. And, if we have to, we'll do it to deal with any new scheme from the government to break up or privatize our health care systems.

The challenges we'll face in the coming months will be many and they'll be big. But we'll face them as we always have – together. With UNA in the lead. And when we do that, we win.

Together we are stronger. Solidarity!

DIGITAL ACTION

