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Public Service Alliance of Canada | Representing 160,000 workers

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Conservatives to penalize women in the federal public sector for successful pay equity complaints

OTTAWA – The Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) says the Conservatives' plan to introduce new legislation covering pay equity for federal public sector employees flies in the face of the principles in the Canadian Human Rights Act, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms as well as international human rights law.

“The Harper government doesn't want to modernize pay equity, it just wants to eliminate its responsibility for providing a workplace free of discrimination, including wage discrimination,” according to PSAC national president John Gordon.

Turning over pay equity to the bargaining table and making both the employer and the union accountable may seem like a reasonable thing to do until you consider the discrepancy between the two parties.

At the same time the government announced its so-called reform, the economic statement also outlined the government's intention to legislate wage increases, including roll-backs of contracts already negotiated, as well as eliminating the right to strike over wages for the next three years. And, this isn't the first time federal governments have passed laws to curtail or eliminate wage increases and to suspend collective bargaining.

“It is completely unreasonable to expect federal public sector unions to be held accountable when the government has complete control,” says Gordon.

The Conservatives are using the PSAC's successful pay equity complaint against the federal government in the 1990s as an excuse to penalize women workers in the federal public sector. Yet, the basis for the complaint was a joint union management study that clearly showed wage discrimination based on gender. The settlement was as large as it was because the Mulroney government rejected the results and the case dragged on for over a decade.

“If the government wants to modernize anything, it should be their 1960s-era classification standards that produced the discriminatory wage rates in the first place,” says Gordon. “After literally years and years of trying to get the federal government to agree to negotiate classification, our latest agreement finally provides for a start on classification reform.”

PSAC has supported a move away from the complaints-based process to deal with pay equity because it's a long, expensive process, marred by employers, including the federal government and Canada Post to name only two, who use their resources to litigate at every step.

Five years ago, a federal Pay Equity Task Force, after extensive consultations with government, business and labour, produced a substantial report with recommendations for a proactive federal pay equity law that would cover all federal public and private sector employers. “If the government wants to modernize the system, it has a blueprint for action in the Task Force Report,” says Gordon. If the Conservatives actually respect the principle of pay equity, this is the way to show it.”

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