PSAC STRIKE MANUAL

Everything you need to know to plan and execute effective strikes



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

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"Without labour nothing prospers."
– Sophocles

All workers are entitled to fairness, dignity and respect. The right to strike is a unionized worker's tool to achieve and defend these rights.

This booklet is designed for members of PSAC, to help you understand strikes, why they happen, how they work and what your role might be during one.

Experienced and inexperienced alike come together during a strike, using creative ideas, skills and bravery to fight for gains such as better wages, job security, improved working conditions, fairness in the workplace and human dignity.

Union members and the community at large benefit from strikes. Workers stand up for their rights and gain better salaries and working conditions from their employers. Other employers see that workers will strike when forced so they are more likely to negotiate actively. And economic gains made in strikes create an upward pressure on overall wages, benefiting the economy and local communities.

When workers unite for their rights, they stand up for democracy and achieve social and economic justice.



This guide features the knowledge that PSAC has acquired after more than 40 years of fighting for workers' rights. It also includes anecdotes and memories from long-time union activists and PSAC staff members.

Feel free to share this booklet with members of other unions and with your friends and family. When we stand up for workers' rights, everyone benefits. We wish you strength and solidarity in your workplaces and communities.

Labour and strikes

The value of our labour

As workers, our labour is of value. It is valuable to us and to our families. We exchange it for wages to pay bills, buy groceries or pay for our children's education.



Our labour is of considerable value to our employer. The removal of our labour is the most powerful tool we have in negotiations.

> *I was new to the federal public service when we went on strike in 1980. Young and without a lot of financial obligations, I was ready, knowing a strike was for the benefit of everyone and not just a few. During that period I learned so much and developed friendships that have endured.*

Democracy in action

There are many misconceptions about strikes. The media doesn't often reflect the experiences of workers walking the picket lines. The following are some myths about strikes:

Myth: Strikes are violent and not in the public's interest.

Fact: The majority of picket lines are non-violent. This misrepresentation results from the news media's focus on the rare scuffles that occur on the picket line.

Myth: Workers who strike are acting unlawfully.

Fact: Unionized workers have a right to strike when their contract negotiations fail and the members have passed a strike vote.

Myth: There is nothing to gain by striking. Striking workers never recover the earnings lost on the picket line.

Fact: Aside from the dignity and respect the workers gain from their employer by voting to strike, the improvements made to the collective agreement often result in not only material, but non-material gains as well. In many cases, the monetary gains made over the life of the collective agreement surpass any losses incurred during a strike.

Myth: A strike has little impact on the employer.

Fact: The very threat of a strike will often force

employers to bargain seriously. They can't get any work done when the majority of their workforce withholds its labour.

Myth: Unionized workers strike too much.

Fact: At PSAC, less than five per cent of contract negotiations result in a strike. We understand the challenges facing members when they vote to strike. We strategize to move negotiations along and to achieve a collective agreement efficiently. The goal is never to go on strike.

Myth: Union bosses call strikes.

Fact: The idea of a "union boss" is flawed. Members democratically run their unions, electing their leadership and voting to go on strike when necessary. If the members vote favourably to strike, the National President of PSAC authorizes the strike action. The mandate comes from the grassroots, not from the "top down."

Strikes are not taken lightly – by the leaders of the union, by the members elected to represent the bargaining unit, or by the rank-and-file workers. Understanding the strike process helps us work together to a successful resolution.

The right to strike

Workers fought hard to achieve the right to strike in all of the major democratic countries around the world. During industrialization, workers were exploited. Long hours, unhealthy work, unsafe conditions, low pay, no overtime, and seven-day work weeks were the norm.

Workers' efforts generated wealth for owners and the business class. Yet poverty and despair was the reality for most workers. They chose to unite and stand up against economic and social injustice.

Many fought to their death to achieve rights in the workplace. Over generations laws were enacted granting workers the right to bargain collectively and with that, the right to strike legally when negotiations fail.

PSAC and strikes

PSAC runs effective strikes that win better salaries, benefits and working conditions for our members. It's part of our history.

Here are some of the lessons we've learned over the years:

- We must use a variety of pressure tactics to achieve our goals.
- Our tactics should escalate progressively. We don't engage in actions early on that we won't be able to duplicate or have impact with a second time.
- We aim for the element of surprise in our actions.

- We plan, plan and plan some more – and are ready for an alternate action if things don't go as planned.
- We vary our targets – from media releases to impacting services to slowing production – always putting the employer on the defensive.
- We develop plans for "essential" workers so they can be part of the action, even if they are not allowed to join us on strike.
- We prepare large-scale activities such as "solidarity parties" from time-to-time, bringing together members, labour allies and community partners to boost the morale of striking workers.
- We keep ahead of the employer by communicating regularly with members.
- We engage area councils, regional councils, regional women's committees and all other PSAC equity-seeking committees to support the striking workers.
- We continually emphasize integrity, validity and fairness in our demands and in our actions.

During a general strike with Treasury Board units in 1991, the Ottawa Regional Women's Committee organized a sit-in at the office of the Minister responsible for the Status of Women in order to draw attention to the issue of pay equity.

Strikes – different strokes for different folks

A **strike** is when unionized workers withhold their labour in an effort to pressure their employer into meeting their demands. Workers go on strike after negotiations have broken down or stalled. The goal is to compel the employer to return to the bargaining table and address workers' demands.

There are different types of strikes that serve different purposes. They may escalate in their intensity:

A **work-to-rule** is when workers obey all the laws and rules applying to their work, but perform their work more slowly or follow "the letter of the law" in an effort to stall productivity.

A **sit-down strike** is a strike in which the workers refuse to work, but stay inside the employer's place of business.

A **sympathy strike** is a concerted work stoppage by workers in one bargaining unit to express solidarity with striking workers in another bargaining unit.

A **study session** is a short "practice" strike that demonstrates to management what the consequences would be of a more prolonged strike.

A **secondary strike** is a strike called against one employer with the aim of influencing another.

Whipsawing describes a series of successive

surprise strikes by a union against the various employers in an industry or in an employer's association, one after another, so that no employer knows which one will be "sawed off" next.

A PSAC **general strike** is a cessation of work by all PSAC members in a particular bargaining unit. (General strike pay provisions apply.)

A **rotating strike** is a series of surprise, up to day-long work stoppages of all bargaining unit members at various strategic geographic locations (i.e.- Ontario members on Monday, Quebec members on Tuesday, etc.). (General strike pay provisions apply.)

A **strategic strike** is a work stoppage by limited number of members of a bargaining unit at a specific number of locations. For PSAC this is 10 per cent of the members of the bargaining unit and is governed by the Alliance Executive Committee. (Strategic strike pay provisions apply.)

A **sector-wide strike** (or industry-wide strike) is a strike by all of the organized workers in a particular sector or industry.

The term **scab** is a "fighting word" that refers to people who continue to work during strike action by trade unionists. The act of working during a strike is also known as **crossing the picket line**. Replacement workers undermine the demands of the workers on strike and are termed "scabs" by those in favour of the strike.

A **lock-out** occurs when the employer exercises its right to prevent bargaining unit employees from working when in a legal strike position.



During the national strike in 2004, we managed the almost impossible at a meeting of the Joint National Council. Two hundred and fifty members belonging to Table 2 entered the Ottawa Congress Centre without being seen by the police. When Reg Alcock, who was President of the Treasury Board at the time, arrived, all of the 250 members entered the conference room where the meeting was being held. Donald Bédard, president of Local 70020 walked to the podium. He spoke to everyone in the room, Employer and union representatives, as well as the strikers. All of the union members rose to give him a round of applause.

Bargaining in a time of economic uncertainty

The gap between the rich and the rest of us is growing. Widespread economic instability creates fear which may lead us to settle for what's being offered. We know that fairness and justice require our action and our participation. Workers need to be able to pay their bills and put food on the table. We know that in both good and bad times, employers are always looking to drive down the cost of our labour. We help workers everywhere when we stand up for our rights and demand to be paid what we're worth.

The collective bargaining process

Strikes don't just happen. There are many stages in the collective bargaining process before it reaches an impasse.

The following are general collective bargaining steps that need to happen before strike action:

1. Before the existing collective agreement expires, the union begins preparations to bargain by reviewing the achievements as well as the demands that were not met during the last round of bargaining.

2. Members provide input into the bargaining process through their local or component, or at meetings organized by their area or regional council. Participants at PSAC equity conferences also help shape the union's bargaining priorities.

3. Workers elect the members of their bargaining team, who will work closely with PSAC's negotiator and other union staff.

4. The bargaining team puts together a demands package, with priority demands clearly spelled out, and sends it to the employer.

5. The bargaining team sets dates with the employer for face-to-face negotiations.

6. The team establishes a bargaining strategy.

7. Face-to-face negotiations begin. The bargaining team keeps members informed throughout the process.

8. When negotiations reach an impasse, the union conducts a strike vote. This only occurs in cases where the parties are entrenched and negotiations have broken down. A strong strike vote gives an extra push at the bargaining table.

9. If the impasse persists the bargaining team may recommend strike action to the PSAC National President who makes the final decision.

Preparing for a strike

Here are some things you can do to personally prepare for a strike:

Stay informed and make sure you know the issues.

- Watch for bulletin board notices in your workplace.
- Visit PSAC's national and regional websites (www.psac-afpc.com).
- Subscribe to email notice lists.
- Read the bulletins distributed by your bargaining team and keep aware of the status of negotiations.
- Participate in mobilization activities and help spread the word in your workplace.

Support your bargaining team by voting "yes" at the strike vote. With a strong mandate to strike, the bargaining team has more leverage at the bargaining table.

- Voting "yes" does not necessarily mean a strike will happen.
- Voting "yes" means you are willing to strike if fairness and justice are at stake.
- Voting "yes" is an act of democratic participation.
- Voting "yes" shows support for union principles.

Get your finances in order and your support networks in place.

- Put money aside to cover expenses in the event of a strike.
- Make arrangements for child care. This could include establishing a coordinated child care plan with other colleagues.
- Make payment arrangements with banks and financial institutions if a strike is imminent. Many of them will accommodate you in this situation. Speak to someone from your union local for sample letters or suggestions on how to approach your bank.
- If you are concerned about serious financial distress in the event of a strike, talk to your strike captain about PSAC's Hardship Fund.
- Talk to your family and friends. Engage them in support of the union's objectives and the strike efforts.
- Develop networks with your colleagues to support each other.

Strikes can prove to be stressful situations. But if you honour your fears, you can rely on collective strength to overcome them. Be open to the experience and learn from it as an active participant in social change.

How to build support from members

In unity there is strength. We can move mountains when we're united and enjoy life – without unity we are victims. Stay united.
– Bill Bailey



A union with an active membership wins strikes. At PSAC, our members are our best resource. We counter the employer's deep pockets with a strong strike fund, with financial support of other unions and with mobilization strategies that demonstrate the strength of worker power.

We build member support at the beginning of the negotiation process. Just as we organize locals to be effective, we organize strikes to be successful. Great strategies and strong financial support don't win strikes. Members win strikes.

Essential Service designation

The law may designate certain workers as performing an "essential service" during a strike. These workers are not permitted to withhold their labour because their services are deemed necessary for the public's safety.

Those with "essential service" designations support the strike by walking the picket line with colleagues outside of work hours and serving on committees. Many also choose to contribute 25 per cent of their pay to the hardship fund – a true act of solidarity that ensures that everyone reaps the benefits of a solid strike.

Member organization – building support from day one

We don't wait until a strike is called to organize members. The negotiating team will sense where the process is heading. If a confrontation is anticipated, PSAC initiates strike preparations months ahead of time.

When the union is in a strong position to strike, the employer knows it and is motivated to bargain sensibly to avoid a walkout.

Here are some tips to help you organize members in support of a strike:

- Make sure your priority demands are well known.
- Plug members with strike experience into coordinating positions.
- Make information about the strike accessible through paper and electronic bulletins, emails, web postings and phone calls.
- Deliver strike training courses to as many members in as many locations as you can.
- Educate members about strike regulations. Make sure they know what their benefits and obligations will be in the event of a strike.
- Contact every member personally, especially if a strike is imminent.
- Welcome new activists into the planning process. Make sure they are engaged with their local and well-informed about priority issues.
- Organize fun and accessible mobilization actions early on in the process, to engage members and encourage them to show their support. As actions escalate, members will begin to take ownership of the bargaining process.
- Address any rumours or questions immediately.

- Organize solidarity events that include family and friends, as well as other unions and community partners.

Mobilizing – One action at a time

Collective actions are the fun and creative part of mobilizing members. They can include anything from wearing red clothes, to phone "call-ins," to rallies at MPs' offices.

Collective actions build on one-on-one communication. They give people a chance to do something about the issue they've just learned about.

Why collective actions?

1. They allow members to participate directly and collectively in an activity, thereby increasing their feelings of solidarity and camaraderie.
2. They send a visible message to management and/or politicians that workers are united and serious about the issue.
3. Often they provide the union with media coverage that allows us to explain our position to the community and help increase community support.
4. They have an impact on the employer and can result in positive change in the workplace.

How to plan actions that work

Collective actions should be planned so as to gradually escalate pressure on the employer. The longer the issue remains unresolved, the more confrontational the collective actions may become. In most cases, you will want to begin with a less confrontational action and then increase it if there is no positive response from management.

In developing your ideas for escalating the campaign, think in terms of "levels of action." The union intensifies the actions and raises the stakes at each level. We bring the membership along by ensuring that they are part of the planning, organizing and implementation of all actions.

Accessibility is key

Keep in mind that not all activities will be appropriate in every circumstance. Get a sense of what your members are willing to do. Don't try to push people too far, too fast.

- Use personal contact to let members know the "when," "where," "how" and "why" of the collective action.
- Make sure your action is accessible to people with disabilities and is reflective of the diverse cultural backgrounds within your membership.
- Provide translation and/or child care, when needed.
- When serving food, be aware of dietary restrictions and potential allergies.
- Ask participants to avoid wearing perfume and using heavily scented products, in order to account for chemical sensitivities.

Here are some ideas that have worked in other workplaces and communities. Some of them are more confrontational than others. They are designed to give you a sense of the range of actions available to members – from the more timid to the more dramatic.

1. **Wear the same colour to work.** Encourage members to wear the same colour on specific days – such as red every Thursday – until the issue is resolved.
2. **Distribute balloons and flags.** Hand a helium balloon (be careful of allergies to latex) or flag to every worker on the way in to work in the morning. Ask them to display them at their desks or in the lunch room. To add to the effect, arrange for people to pop the balloons or wave their flags at a particular time.
3. **Enter the workplace en masse.** Arrange for everyone to wait outside the front door and walk in together at the beginning of a shift or work day. You may want to serve refreshments and sing union songs while the group gathers.

4. **Use colour-coordinated ink.** Arrange to have everyone who is responsible for filling out reports use green ink one week, then red the next, etc. This is a great way to get hesitant members involved and get the employer's attention.



5. **Synchronize your actions.** At a specific time, arrange to have all members at a workplace do something in unison like tapping their pencils on their desks, singing a solidarity song, clapping their hands or waving their hands in the air.

6. **Return trinkets.** Organize members to collect and return any promotional items such as mugs and t-shirts they've been given by the employer.

7. **Hold a "theme day."** Choose a theme, like "my employer's making me ill." Encourage people to dress up and participate in lunchtime activities. An example might be something like "a race to the bottom" at the annual work picnic that features various corporate bosses competing for the lowest paid workers.

8. **Host a "lunch with a bunch."** The Machinists' Union coined this phrase during their mobilization at Eastern Airlines. Invite other organizations and make it a rally or an educational event. Hold song writing or sign making workshops. Have some sidewalk chalk on hand and encourage people to leave messages for the employer.

9. **Stage a mock funeral.** Gather at dusk with candles in front of an MP's office, federal building or other place of employment. This creates dramatic pictures for the evening television news. Bring a coffin to your employer: "R.I.P. federal public service jobs," or whatever other slogan may be appropriate.

10. **Organize a children's march.** Bring out your members' kids and grandkids. Give them union hats, balloons and small picket signs (cut your usual signs in half). This tactic generates good media coverage and builds solidarity within families and in the community.

Other ideas:

- Distribute handbills or information flyers in the workplace.
- Canvass members one-on-one to spread the word and gauge their opinions.



- Set up display tables in the lobby at work.
- Display posters, buttons and other union symbols in the office.
- Send postcards to the employer.
- Picket managers' and/or MPs' offices.
- Attend employer meetings or events en masse.

We escalate actions as more membership pressure is required to move bargaining forward. A work slowdown is a strike in the eyes of the law and labour relations tribunals, so we act accordingly - strategically.

For more tips on how to mobilize members and build support for a strike, check out the PSAC booklet, *Take Action! Everything you need to know to mobilize workers to win positive change.* Visit www.psac-afpc.com to download a copy, or phone 613-560-4200 to order one.

How PSAC organizes strikes

PSAC's members, officers and staff all have important roles to play in preparation for strikes and during work stoppages. We keep members informed throughout the negotiation process and invite them to cast ballots in a strike vote to show support for their bargaining team. The union's officers and staff coordinate all of the logistical details of a strike, to ensure that members know what they should be doing, where they should be doing it and how they can guarantee their safety.

We work hard to lift people's spirits when they are in this challenging position. We build support and solidarity from PSAC members in other bargaining units, as well as the broader community and labour movement.



PSAC believes that we build a stronger society by standing up for workers' rights and sometimes we must strike to make this happen. When we show solidarity with striking workers, we enhance the power of working people and contribute to the growth of our communities.

Running picket lines

Picketing must involve everyone. To help run things smoothly, picket captains should establish schedules and lead the picket lines during a strike. To be effective, we:



- Picket heaviest when it will affect the employer most.
- Move members from one picket line to another, adjusting picketing timetables to be most effective.
- Use creative tactics on the picket line to appeal to members and the public.
- Invite other striking workers to our pickets and join them on their picket lines.
- Ensure that everyone respects non-violence and follows PSAC policies and practices.
- Find ways to be inclusive of members who have accessibility requirements.
- Engage "flying squads" – small groups of trained activists who move about strategically to:
  - ❑ provide back-up when support is needed on the picket line;
  - ❑ reinforce picket lines;
  - ❑ bolster numbers in emergency situations;
  - ❑ show support at strategic sites or actions; and,
  - ❑ boost morale on the picket line.

We keep ourselves motivated. We vary our activities so members don't get bored. We emphasize the democratic action of striking. We appeal to those on the sidelines to join in.

Respecting picket lines

When we withhold our labour, we challenge our employer financially and stop dissident members and scabs from entering the work site. We prevent the public from receiving goods or services and slow down or cut off supplies intended for employers. This puts pressure on employers to listen to workers' demands at the bargaining table.

Respecting picket lines is a union principle.

Members may initially not support the strike for any number of reasons. They might not understand the principle of not crossing the picket line or they might believe the union is taking the wrong position. Many people are afraid of reprisal and fear financial hardship.

We must take the opportunity to help members understand the importance of going on strike and let them know about the resources that are available to them when they join the picket line.

We constantly assess the effectiveness of picket lines by asking the following questions:

- Are we keeping scabs out?
- Is production being impacted?
- Has the employer been forced to move or contract out its operations?
- Have we created enough of a disruption to warrant media attention?
- Are the police intervening? How are they treating the picketers?
- Are there signs that the employer is getting desperate for work to resume?

Every member of PSAC has a right and obligation to respect picket lines. We do not cross picket lines unless permitted to do so by the union concerned. The union guarantees against sanctions or reprisals prior to issuing a return to work call.

PSAC's picket line policies

PSAC's constitution outlines the rules, roles and responsibilities associated with collective bargaining and strikes. The decision to strike starts with the members who vote to take action.

The National President is accountable for all labour conflicts and makes the final decision about whether or not to strike and when to return to work, based on the results of the vote by PSAC members.

PSAC policies govern the behaviour and conduct of members, elected representatives and staff during all PSAC activities, including strikes.



PSAC Strike Fund

Strike pay is important. A portion of all PSAC members' dues are directed to the Strike Fund, which members can access when they participate in strike actions. Members register their strike activity with picket or strike captains to receive strike pay.

PSAC Hardship Fund

Financial hardship does happen during labour stoppages. PSAC's Hardship Fund provides emergency financial assistance to striking or locked-out PSAC members experiencing financial distress.

Members who perform "essential services" and must therefore report to work are asked to remit 25 per cent of their take-home pay to the National Hardship Fund. This reflects the core union principle that an injury to one is an injury to all and is a true act of solidarity.

The Hardship Fund is regionally administered by committees that assess requests for emergency assistance and make recommendations for funding to the appropriate PSAC Executive Committee officer.

Roles and responsibilities

When PSAC members go on strike, a network of union activists and PSAC staff members spring into action. Each person plays a specific role that helps the strike run smoothly and strategically.

Picket captains are the people in charge of picket lines in a specific location. They are the most direct contact for the members who are out on the picket line. They share information with all members on their picket, distributing leaflets and providing instruction sheets as necessary. Picket captains report to and receive information from the strike captain and have previously attended PSAC's strike training course. They keep an accurate record of the members in their particular unit and the shifts they work on the line – name, date, time in and time out.

Picket captains work with a local **picketing committee** to plan daily strike activities – from visual stunts to solidarity picnics. Picket captains keep a camera on hand in case of incidents on the line and make sure that picket sign messages reflect union principles. They address questions from the public and from local media and report conduct that is inappropriate and not in keeping with PSAC policies and practices.

Strike captains are appointed by the executive of each PSAC local and are in charge of coordinating the local's strike actions. They have previously attended the PSAC strike course and clearly understand the union's strike regulations. Strike captains' main job is to ensure that there is efficient and effective strike action within the local. They report to the **area coordinator**, but work with local officers to organize strike committees. Strike captains receive advice from the area coordinator and consider all planning suggestions from the picket captains, assessing their legal implications.

Strike captains coordinate and implement strike plans that are as simple as possible, are flexible to changing circumstances and maximize member participation. They recruit competent and experienced members for positions such as picket

captains or for other specific tasks. They also ensure that strikers' conduct is appropriate and in keeping with PSAC policies and practices. The number of locals in an area determines the number of strike captains. A large local with many members on strike may also include assistant strike captains.

> During the 2003 holiday season, carollers traveled by bus to different work sites singing traditional Christmas carols rewritten with messages about collective bargaining. It was unique way of getting the message out to members about an impending strike – and a lot of fun!

Area coordinators liaise with the regional strike coordinator, strike captains and local officers, to make sure that strike actions in a particular area are well coordinated. They serve as members of the **regional strike coordinating committee**, which prepares a regional strike plan, oversees coordination of strike activities and ensures good communication amongst everyone involved. This committee includes the Regional Executive Vice-President in their jurisdiction and is chaired by the regional strike coordinator.

The position of **regional strike coordinator** is generally filled by a regional representative in the PSAC office closest to where the strike is taking place. This person coordinates strike training for the region and ensures that the regional office is

providing appropriate support to the strike. The regional strike coordinator keeps the area coordinators well-informed about the strategy and direction of the strike and establishes an effective communication system with the capacity to deliver urgent information quickly.

The role of **national strike coordinator** is filled by the Director of PSAC's Regional Office Branch or the union's strike mobilization officer. The national strike coordinator reports to the **national strike coordinating committee** and oversees the entire strike communications network throughout PSAC's regional offices, the component offices and the National Board of Directors. The national strike coordinator resolves strike network problems and ensures that the regional strike structure is operating effectively.

The **National Strike Coordinating Committee** coordinates all of PSAC's resources and activities in support of the negotiating team and the strike. The committee develops mobilization and strike support strategies at a national level, making recommendations to the National President, the Alliance Executive Committee and the National Board of Directors on these matters. The membership of this committee varies, based on the size of the bargaining unit(s) and the number of components involved in a particular strike.

When it comes to smaller bargaining units or strike actions, some of these roles may be consolidated.

Coordinating and running a strike takes many different players to be successful. PSAC members and staff work hard to run effective and powerful strikes that defend workers' rights and improve their lives and communities.





Picket Line Idol was the ticket to boost morale during a 2003 strike at the Canada Revenue Agency. Members of the Surrey tax office started the contest using songs from the PSAC strike handbook. At each of the entrances Idol teams picked songs and rehearsed their performances. A huge basket of chocolate was up for grabs. "Auditions" created quite a stir. Much cheering and excitement ensued. This helped raise spirits and encouraged new people to take on informal leadership roles for the duration of the strike.

Engaging for success

Getting members involved in strikes

No round of collective bargaining or strike action can be successful without an engaged and informed membership. Spontaneous engagement does not happen, it is planned.

During bargaining, start preparing for the possibility of a strike:

- Distribute bargaining updates to keep members informed of progress and potential obstacles.
- Update membership information, including signing up "Rands" (members of the bargaining unit who have not formally signed their PSAC membership card).
- Hold membership meetings at pivotal times to enlist their support.
- Run strike courses and make sure they are fully attended.
- Listen to what grassroots members are saying and use this information to shape the way you communicate with workers.
- Escalate member actions to show the employer that the bargaining unit supports the negotiating team – t-shirts, buttons, and noon-hour information pickets are all great examples.
- If it looks like you might be going on strike, begin preparations early. Scout out locations for picketing and for the strike headquarters. Apply for the necessary permits and develop picketing and telephone lists.
- Establish a strike protocol with the employer. This sends a clear signal that the union is serious about the possibility of a strike.

> The National Capital Region filled a "solidarity bus" with members to visit striking canal workers during negotiations with Parks Canada Agency. The members encouraged the workers and distributed information to the public at each of the locks in support of the strikers' demands.

Checklist for a successful strike

- Identify tasks to assign to locals and members.
- Schedule picket line duties.
- Take attendance of members at strike activities.
- Develop and distribute newsletters. Update the database of members' contact information.
- Update bulletin/notice boards with the latest strike-related news.
- Compile and distribute answers to members' questions.
- Provide information sheets at activities.

- Keep adequate inventories of picket signs, placards and mobilizing materials.
- Prepare reports daily, or as deemed necessary, for those overseeing the strike.
- Ensure picket captains have all of the necessary documentation.
- Alert the police to the planned activities in advance.
- Communicate picket line conduct to all members.
- Investigate picket line violations.
- Ensure a camera is at each picket line to document any incidents that may occur.
- Arrange for washroom facilities for strikers.
- Pay strike benefits to those who are eligible.
- Attend to hardship requests from those in financial distress.
- Raise funds and in-kind donations from locals, community groups, churches, charitable organizations, political groups, social justice allies and others.
- Assist members who need advice on financial matters such as negotiating 'stop payments' on mortgages, credit cards and other bills for the duration of the strike.
- Attend to members' accessibility requirements.

Clerks, mostly women, took to the streets in 1980 – striking for better wages and more respect – both from their employer and their union. They achieved a 24.7 per cent increase over two years and changed the face of their union forever, getting elected to office in increasing numbers and bringing women's issues to the fore in PSAC and the work it does.

Establishing committees

There are different ways to get all of this work done. Establishing committees at the local or workplace level is one approach. Some examples include:

- Communications Committee
- Picketing Committee
- Welfare and Hardship Committee
- Fundraising Committee
- Essential Services Committee
- Accessibility Committee

Communication between committees and strike captains is important in the overall coordination of activities.

No matter what approach we choose and how many committees we establish, people need to be assigned to specific tasks and be responsible for

them. Members require training if they are to complete these tasks successfully. This should happen long before the strike.

In 2004, a PSAC member dressed as Mr. Peanut and distributed peanut packages with "Public Services Not For Sale" stickers on one side and an important warning on the reverse that read "Warning: federal government's wage offer is peanuts. May or may not contain minute traces of benefit improvements. Continued exposure will cause allergic reaction.



Efficient and effective communications

The best way to engage members and keep them motivated and well-informed about strike activities is to communicate promptly and clearly. Think about your readers and their needs before drafting any bulletins or flyers.

Speaking with – and listening to – our members:

- **Clearly articulate priority demands and their rationale.** Avoid jargon and don't lift language right out of a contract or a collective agreement. Take the time to explain what workers want and why they have chosen to strike.
- **Use as many communication channels as possible.** Flyers, email messages, web updates, phone calls and in-person meetings all serve different purposes and reach members with different needs. Vary your communication strategies so everyone gets to hear the most important news.
- **Emphasize union and social justice principles.** Connect the strike with broader struggles for human rights and social change.
- **Focus on solutions.** Highlight how the union's proposals will solve workplace problems and promote members' human rights. This will help compel reluctant members to join you on the picket line.
- **Dispel rumours immediately** and ensure that members receive accurate information.
- **Stay ahead of the employer.** Release bulletins, email updates and flyers as quickly as possible after a particular situation arises.

These days, many employers use their websites and intranet systems to communicate directly with workers. This undermines the union's message, so the key is to get our message out first.

- **Listen to your members.** Use their feedback to improve your communications. Do members understand the issues you are talking about? Do they have concerns that are not reflected in the messages you've been releasing? Think about how you can be more responsive to their needs and concerns when you draft your next message.



Assessing communications systems throughout the bargaining process is crucial – especially during a strike. Identify gaps and correct them. Listen to what the grassroots members are saying or not saying – this is vital.

> Our message must be clear. Our objectives need to be understood. Members who don't support the objectives should be engaged and brought on side.

Building support from allies:

- **Build support from other unions** leading up to potential strike action. Make sure that the Canadian Labour Congress, local federations of labour and district labour councils are aware of your bargaining demands. Invite them to your activities and keep them posted on the status of negotiations**.**
- **Make your strike a community concern.** Hold information sessions for the general public and request letters of support from community groups. Explain to people why your stand for workers' rights helps promote human rights and social justice for everyone.
- **Meet with your MP.** Explain your reasons for striking and request his or her support. Keep a record of your MP's response and stay in contact throughout the strike.

Talking to the media:

Strikes make the news. The mainstream media often characterizes strikes negatively. This means that the public usually doesn't get the whole story and may see public sector strikes in a negative light.

Personal contact with journalists is critical to breaking down the barriers. Having one person who develops an ongoing relationship with your local media can improve your chances of getting news coverage.

PSAC's media guidelines maintain that only elected officials, or specific spokespeople designated by the Alliance Executive Committee are permitted to speak on behalf of the union. When it comes to national strikes, PSAC's National President is the official spokesperson and media contact.

This helps ensure that our message stays strategic and consistent. But quite often, strike captains are approached to add "local colour" to a story about a particular labour dispute.

If you have been designated as a PSAC spokesperson, here are some guidelines to follow when speaking with reporters:

- **Never favour one media outlet over another,** unless a journalist has come up with a "scoop" because of his or her dogged, hard work.
- **Never refuse to answer a question.** Remember, the journalist can easily get the answer elsewhere, so you may as well take the opportunity to control the "spin" on the issue and get the credit rather than the opposition.
- **Never get caught out in an obvious inaccuracy.** If you don't know, just say you don't know. Call back the reporter when you have the answer. If this is information you can't release at this point, say so and call the reporter once you can release the information.
- **Avoid using union "buzzwords" or jargon** that may be familiar to you but may mystify and confuse others.
- **Provide information sheets** summarizing priority issues.
- **Respect the publicity strategy** that has been decided on by the union.
- **Respect PSAC's principles, policies and standards** – make no racist, homophobic, transphobic or sexist remarks.
- **Be creative.** Use street theatre, colourful signs and other attention-getting techniques to pique reporters' interest.

Remember: the employer will always put out propaganda to which the media will respond. Don't buy into it – ask your strike captain before you react.

During the Treasury Board strike in 2001, Prime Minister Jean Chrétien was scheduled to make an appearance in Yellowknife, NWT. PSAC members lined the street in the rain to greet his arriving limo. One of the activists wore a Chrétien mask and proceeded to answer questions from reporters. The crowd and media loved it. The event got front page coverage the next day, with little mention of the actual PM's arrival.

Countering the employer's tactics

PSAC works hard to proactively anticipate the employer's actions before and during a strike. Members are more responsive and engaged when their union stays one step ahead of their boss.

Ask the following questions to help determine the employer's strategy:

- Is the employer going to maintain production or services?
- Is the employer planning to transfer production or services?
- Is the employer going to liquidate current stock?
- Is the employer in a position to interrupt its production and services and for how long?

Employers have spent many years honing their tactics for defeating unions We have to be one step ahead of them and react quickly when necessary.

Employers might try to:

- Discredit union demands with the membership and the public.
- Demobilize members by dragging bargaining out for lengthy periods.
- Take pictures and videos of picket lines to intimidate members.
- Confuse members with misinformation.
- Scare members by hiring intimidating private security personnel.
- Get injunctions to prohibit or reduce picketing.
- Take legal action against key activists.

Management: spreading misinformation

Employers will use any means necessary to bypass the union and speak directly to members. They generally use spam filters to prevent union email messages from reaching workers' inboxes. This allows them to broadcast their own messages via internal systems (email, phone and mail), while simultaneously silencing the union's perspective.

They will often demand that a union's bargaining team agree to an information blackout – keeping key details confidential and not sharing them with members. PSAC generally refuses this request because it creates a dangerous vacuum of information into which rumours and misinformation will spread. We exercise our right

in most labour codes to keep our members well-informed about the progress of negotiations.

> In the 1991 general strike of Treasury Board members, departments issued letters to members, falsely stating that their positions had been deemed essential in an effort to convince them to cross the picket line.

Dealing with the police

Union members have a legal right to strike. Police have a dual role to carry out when a strike begins: they protect the rights of striking members on the picket line and also protect the property of the employer.

The union liaises with police in advance of a strike, briefing them on who the contact people are for the union, ensuring that the picket and strike captains are in place and that the union is clear about its rights and responsibilities.

Employers will try to use the police as part of their intimidation strategy. The presence of police may also provoke members to act out when emotions are charged. Remember that lawfully conducted picketing is a constitutionally protected right.

Members should remain neutral in their actions toward the police and never let the calm, friendly demeanour of the officers be construed as support for the strike.

Trained picket and strike captains will guide the membership in their interactions with the police. Cell phones are on hand to call for legal or other assistance should the need arise.



Generally, striking members should:

- avoid provocation;
- avoid bodily contact;
- refrain from verbal assaults;
- obey the orders of police; and,
- remain aware of what's happening in your area; you may be called as a witness in future proceedings.

Back-to-work agreements

After a strike or lock-out ends, we try to negotiate a back-to-work agreement to protect union members.

Our ability to negotiate a back-to-work agreement, and its strength, depends on how long members are willing and able to stay on strike to achieve it.



When our members go back to work, PSAC works to ensure that no one faces any disciplinary action.

We negotiate an agreement so that all strike-related reprisals are cancelled. The union also ensures that workers employed on the date the strike began are recalled after the strike, according to seniority, where applicable.

We seek reasonable deadlines for return to work and demand that seniority acquired during the strike be recognized, where applicable. Employees should be protected from reprisals if they happen to be sick on the day that work is scheduled to re-start. PSAC negotiates any provisions necessary to ensure a smooth return to work.

Unfortunately, it is not always possible to achieve all of these goals. Some are easier to win than others. But we do our best!

In summary

We make tremendous gains when we exercise our right to strike.

Every extra percentage achieved in wage settlements contributes to pensionable earnings.

Every newly negotiated benefit contributes to our well-being and that of our families.

Each newly negotiated workplace right gives us more say in our working lives.

All new provisions negotiated in successive rounds of collective bargaining add value to our labour.

Keep these things in mind when you speak with your family, people in your community and even other union members who might question the effectiveness of striking. Together we are stronger – in solidarity!

I was a term employee during the Clerical and Regulatory strike in the 1980s. As a union member on the picket line, I was so overwhelmed by the union's positive role and the government's total lack of respect for us workers. This encouraged me to take a more active role in my union. From Secretary, to Vice-President, to President, and as the only woman in my area involved in the No Zones campaign, I was hooked. Today I proudly work for a union.

For more information on PSAC policies, accessibility issues and strike procedures and protocols visit www.psac-afpc.com.

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