

**Scholarship Essay written for the
Professional Employees Association
on the topic:**

**“Discuss the impact of provincial government
funding cuts on unionized public sector workers
and the public they serve.”**

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Government Funding cuts to unionized workers are the government's response to a deficit caused by reducing taxes from business and thus has also reduced their revenue. The 2010 Olympic Games have left British Columbia with critical funding pressures and years of inadequate funding have already reduced Ministry budgets to critical levels. Over and above this the recent economic recession has reduced natural royalty revenue to the Provincial Government and this downturn has prompted an increasing in demand for social services. Through all of this the aging population demands increasing Health Care services and other government services. The Government has responded to all of these changes by cutting funding to both program and salary budgets which hurts both the public sector and British Columbian citizens.

Effects on Unionized Public Sector Workers:

Public union funding cuts leads not only to a loss of jobs and a loss of talent but also to a job freeze. If new and younger employees are not entering the workforce then when all of the senior employees retire that sector will be left with an overwhelming shortage of skilled and trained workers. Not only will new talent not be coming into the sector but the younger employees will be hit the hardest with layoffs and all employees could be asked to take unpaid leave. According to CBC News in January of this year 233 layoff notices have gone out to employees from the Ministry of Forests and the Ministry Citizens' Services (CBC News). Large scale layoffs such as these are a deterrent to new workers looking for jobs because of uncertainly of job stability and job satisfaction. Along with layoffs; unpaid leave or a voluntary reduced workweek (VRW), Job freezes and Wages Freezes are also being

utilized to help counteract the lack of funding. As reported in an article from the National Union of Public and General Employees (NUPGE 1) the VWR still has some reservations about it and employee reactions have been mixed. One of the main issues with the VWR is that with funding cuts there is a shortage of staff and then if employees are utilizing this option and taking days off it send a message to the government that workload is a non-issue (NUPGE 1). This is the exact opposite of the message that needs to be sent.

Related to job losses funding cuts will also mean that the employees who remain will have increased workloads as well as an increased scope of what their job now requires them to do (Marshall). Especially in sectors such as Nursing and Education where cutting the scope of the service isn't as simple as cutting a program; the care factor is still expected and required. For example if funding is cut in Health Care then there will be less RNs and LPNs but these nurses that are left still are needed to provided the same amount of care as was expected before. Since the budget has lessened and the amount of nurses to provide this care has also lessened and the amount of care should not be lessened then the only thing left to change is the type and amount of care and the quality of care. This increased workload which will overwork the employees' leads to more work related injuries and sick days (Kivimaki) as people get tired and stressed out and are unable to properly do their jobs. A rise in injuries will also lead to fewer nurses at work which will start the entire cycle again.

The effect of downsizing and increased workloads for all employees increases stress levels as well as survivors guilt, lack of trust in upper management and mismatched goals with the company (Bacal). These "symptoms" of downsizing lead to moral issues, job

dissatisfaction, an individual approach before a team one and increasing internal struggles for resources (Bacal).

Effects on the Public:

These funding cuts harm not only the unionized employees but also their public. The public relies on the range of services that are provided by public unionized workers and funding cuts have serious impacts on these services. With less workers to perform the services wait times will skyrocket. For example this year wait times in Nanaimo for a MRI has increased from about four and a half months to 18 months (Marshall). There will also be increased waiting time for processing licenses and other documents such as private timber mark or water license that need to be signed off on due to the increase of work expected to be done by one worker. A reduction in services produced by these budget cuts are not only expected but already predicted. The Ministry of Forest and Range will be forced to discontinue “programs such as research, stewardship and compliance and enforcement.” These programs are essential to the industry’s management of resources as well as to their revitalization (Russell). Other services such as child care, transportation and legal services are also being slashed (NUPGE 2/Love).

Declining amount of services and increased workloads due to downsizing also leads to a decrease in the quality of service received by the public. This is especially evident in Health Care situations where nurses are being required to move throughout the hospital without ever really being oriented in a certain department and work that RNs should be doing is being passed to LPNs and Care Aids (Marshall). The aging population needs a

higher level of care that perhaps a care aid cannot give them. Also overworked employees who are stressed out and frustrated with their jobs will give substandard service to anyone that they are serving (Kivimak). When public services are cut so dramatically they are often incredibly difficult to rebuild again. Trying to fix a 'broken' service is a lot harder than it would appear especially when it is difficult to pinpoint where the break is. This is the case with BC's ambulance paramedics. Health Minister Kevin Falcon rejected their offer to roll over their collective agreement in favour of fixing the system the only problem with this according to CUPE local 873 president J. Strohmaier is that Falcon doesn't understand where the ambulance service is broken (The Canadian Press). Another rebuilding problem is that once the skilled and trained employees are dismissed they go elsewhere and find new jobs and are usually unwilling to come back. This makes the rebuilding process not only difficult but also time consuming and costly.

Potential Structural Changes:

These result of budget cuts are vast, have a huge impact and are not beneficial for anyone but the governments overall budget in the short term. A long lasting ramification is that British Columbia's economy could change from a highly unionized one to a privatized one. If this occurs it would be incredibly difficult to change back to a unionized, publicly accountable public service approach for things. A privatized environment has some serious impacts as well. Instead of a system based on public well-being it would be based on profit potential. Low profit potential services would be ignored in favour of higher profits ones such as Cosmetic surgery versus correcting a disability. The individual costs would increase

and leave many levels of society behind and unable to catch up. Also accountability to the public is reduced since private corporations are not open to public scrutiny.

Alternative to Funding Cuts:

An option that is less dramatic than massive budget cuts is to carry a larger deficit for longer. Other Jurisdictions have used this method in the past. British Columbia is an endowed province with a variety of resources that will generate revenue in the future and its economy has been strong in the past. Also a province that provides good services to its residents becomes an attractive location for people to live which will cause immigration to the province thereby strengthening the economy.

Conclusions:

Government budget cuts have long lasting and serious impacts not only on the sectors on which the budgets are being cut and the public those sectors serve but also on society in the long term. Unions are important in ensuring that workers' rights are not lost due to short term funding pressures and also to help prevent privatisation of public services. Programs that have been cut are difficult to reinstate. Hiring freezes decrease the chances of new talent entering the sector and layoffs not only lose good people but also affect the ones who stay and decrease the services available and the quality of those services. All in all budget cuts are detrimental to an economy and leave many people behind and without much help.

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