

The relationship between governments and unions is both essential and inherently complex. Each plays a critical role in maintaining a just and functioning society, yet they often approach their responsibilities from different vantage points. Governments are tasked with managing public interests, ensuring the continuity of essential services, and maintaining economic stability. Unions, on the other hand, are champions of workers' rights, advocating for fair wages, occupational health and safety, pension protection, and equitable treatment. As our workplaces evolve and societal expectations shift, this relationship becomes increasingly significant.

In recent years, the friction between these two groups has been more noticeable, particularly when governments step in and interfere with collective bargaining. A prime example is Alberta's Bill 32: the *Restoring Balance in Alberta's Workplaces Act*, which was passed in 2022<sup>(1)</sup>. Many critics saw it as a direct attack on unions, as it restricted how they could use member dues, especially for political advocacy, making it harder for them to influence public opinion. On the federal level in 2018, back-to-work legislation was used against the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW)<sup>(2)</sup>, abruptly ending their rotating strikes and effectively sidestepping the bargaining process entirely. These actions show a troubling trend: governments are moving from being neutral mediators to becoming active participants who dictate the terms of labour negotiations<sup>(3)</sup>.

Governments often justify this interference by claiming they need to protect essential services, but these actions can have lasting consequences. When the bargaining table is replaced by a legislative decision, it erodes the trust between labour and the government. The right to strike isn't just a negotiating tactic; it's a democratic way for workers to make their voices heard.

Taking that away, as we saw with the CUPW case, completely throws off the balance of power and infringes upon rights that are protected by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

These legal/procedural issues are only part of the problem. When unions can't bargain freely, it has a ripple effect on the entire workforce. Workers become distrustful and morale drops, which can hurt the public perception of unions and public services. This can also lead to challenges with recruiting and keeping skilled people in critical sectors like healthcare and education. Worse yet, government interference can set a dangerous precedent, giving private employers the opportunity to take a similarly dismissive approach to workers' rights.

In response, unions must continue to evolve and resist these pressures with strategic, values-based approaches. Public education is a powerful tool. By reaching out to the broader community, especially younger and non-unionized workers, unions can help people understand why collective bargaining is so important. Building alliances with other labour organizations and community groups can amplify their message and create a united front. Political advocacy is also key; by supporting candidates and policies that respect labour rights, they can ensure workers have a seat at the table at every level of government.

Ultimately, government interference in collective bargaining is not simply a procedural disruption. It is a challenge to the fundamental rights of workers and the integrity of the labour movement. While the maintenance of public services is undeniably important, it must not come at the expense of democratic values. Unions have a responsibility to remain vigilant, adaptive, and committed to the principles of fairness, voice, and dignity in the workplace.

## **References**

1. Jason Kenney's anti-worker, anti-union Bill 32 will be challenged in the courts – AFL. Retrieved on July 29, 2025. [Link](#)
2. CUPW continues making its case today at the Industrial Inquiry Commission. Retrieved on July 29, 2025. [Link](#)
3. Sections 107 and 108 of the Canada Labour Code. Retrieved on July 30, 2025. [Link](#)