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### **Signing contract shouldn't be so hard**

By Jeannie Baldwin

It's time to shed some light on a large Nova Scotia employer and the shameful way it is treating one group of unionized workers, the 183 people who provide security and ground transportation services at the Halifax Robert L. Stanfield International Airport.

The workforce includes many men and women who have served their country in the Canadian Forces, Royal Canadian Mounted Police and municipal police forces. They are members of the Public Service Alliance of Canada and are trying to negotiate their first collective agreement. They are part of the team responsible for the airport authority winning passenger satisfaction awards six years in a row. Our members contribute to this airport being one of the best-run in the world.

The employer is the Nova Scotia Division of the Canadian Corps of Commissionaires, one of 17 divisions of a national, non-profit organization founded in 1925 to provide employment to veterans of the uniformed services. This praiseworthy purpose is recognized by the federal government, which gives the corps preference over private companies in the security and protection business. The corps is now one of the leaders in a growing industry, handling contracts worth tens of millions of dollars. The Nova Scotia division is run by a paid executive and a voluntary board, heavily weighted with retired career military and reserve officers.

Special advantages have been granted the corps as an acknowledgement of its role in assisting those who have served their country in uniform to make the transition to civilian life. What has been difficult for workers at the Halifax airport to accept is that the employer seems to believe former uniformed service people should be so grateful for their low-paying jobs that they will work for less than what is guaranteed any citizen covered by the Canada Labour Code. The airport workers want the basic overtime and paid holiday provisions that the code provides.

The employer seems to expect that former police and service members should abide by an outdated notion of military discipline, applied inappropriately in their workplace. Men and women who served their country, protecting and defending the rights of others, are not suddenly willing to forgo their own rights as workers, including the right to a fair hearing in disciplinary matters. Members of the Canadian Forces can appeal to an independent arm's-length grievance board, while airport workers have no such option. The Corps of Commissionaires

unilaterally removes workers from their duties without just cause and without putting anything in writing.

Even more galling is the notion that because some of our members receive military or police pensions, they are somehow less entitled to a fair wage for their labour. These jobs are not "gravy" to our pensioned members, who are working because they need to work. We have others in the workplace not receiving pensions and trying to support families on rates of pay between \$11 and \$16 an hour.

The cost of the security service provided at Halifax International Airport should not be subsidized by our members. The corps has a bidding edge over private companies, but its competitiveness should not be dependent on keeping our members at near minimum-wage rates.

The pattern for this unfair treatment has been seen all over Canada: the Corps of Commissionaires has a record of obstructing union certification by workers for years and, after certification is achieved, of causing contract negotiations to drag on interminably. The effort to achieve a first contract for Halifax airport workers follows a similar struggle with the corps at Toronto airport. Our members know what they are up against — they just can't see any good reason for the intransigence.

Could it be that a board stacked with former military and police officers doesn't "get" what's happening here? Our members are not before them, cap in hand, subservient and deferring to the higher ranks. In the union-management world, we are at the table as equals, asking for respect and a fair deal.

The corps' board of governors and executives may feel they are shielded from public scrutiny or criticism because of their honourable mission — providing employment to former service members. Our members say it would be far more honourable to accept that workers have a right to negotiate a contract and, at the bare minimum, to receive what the law provides under the Canada Labour Code. With what our workers are asking, it shouldn't be this hard to get a first collective agreement.

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