

Public service unions abandon neutrality to challenge expected Conservative cuts

By Kathryn May, The Ottawa Citizen March 21, 2012

Public service unions have launched an unprecedented social media campaign that attacks the Conservatives' looming spending cuts as undermining the health and safety of Canadians.

OTTAWA — The white-collar professionals who work in the federal government are breaking their silence as loyal and neutral public servants with the launch of an unprecedented social media campaign that attacks the Conservatives' looming spending cuts as undermining the health and safety of Canadians.

The campaign, called Professionals Serving Canadians, is led by a coalition of six unions that represent more than 75,000 professionals, from scientists and lawyers to pilots and finance officers. They have never joined forces against the policies of the government their members work for. The unions representing professionals have historically stuck to bread-and-butter worker issues such as wages, shunning the broader labour movement and steering clear of getting involved in policy issues.

But in a pre-launch rally, union leaders said the health, safety and security of Canadians, which they believe will be compromised by anticipated budget cuts of up to \$8 billion a year, is more important than the tradition of an invisible and neutral public service. The campaign, which cost \$7 per member, publicly kicks off on Thursday.

The unions, which collectively represent most public servants, are girding for the March 29 federal budget, which is expected to announce the results of the deficit-reduction action plan. Departments had to offer plans for five- and 10-per-cent reductions to help reach the government's targets for cuts.

"I think what gets all of us is there is this obscure truth in the back of all our minds that the public service has to remain subordinate, remain suppressed and, above all, remain silent ... This coalition is about making sure we aren't silent," said Marco Mendicino, president of the Association of Justice Counsel, during a pre-launch webcast.

The message is simple: Cut public service jobs and undermine health and safety. Mendicino, a federal prosecutor, said streets aren't kept safe by omnibus crime bills, but by "people, and the public service is integral to keeping people safe."

Gary Corbett, president of the Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada, said the job of public servants is to serve and advise the government, but if they aren't heard they have a responsibility to act in the public interest and warn Canadians about the impacts of worrisome policies.

He argued the secrecy around the cuts has effectively silenced the public debate on what Canadians are prepared to give up in the name of austerity. Public servants can't speak out, so the unions will do it for them, he said.

“Given the direction of this government, and everything done in secret, shouldn't someone speak up with concerns? And that's what we are doing,” he said. “Loyalty and neutrality are still important, and what we hear from our members isn't concerns about their jobs, but rather what will be left after more cuts, and risks Canadians face with the policies of this government.”

The campaign is built around a web-based commercial that's a parody of *Hinterland Who's Who*, a series of public service announcements that profiled Canadian wildlife in the 1960s and 1970s. The ad opens with a shot of termites, and says that like termites, the Conservative government is eating the foundation of Canada. It raises questions about the cuts to food, marine and air safety and closes with a shot of a hunk of red meat crawling across the floor, a reference to the reduction in the number of meat and veterinary inspectors.

The ad is posted on the Professionals Serving Canadians website (www.safetyeh.ca) and on Facebook and Twitter. Canadians are asked to email, tweet or post on Facebook their concerns about the cuts. A key part of the coalition's strategy is to have Canadians let them know what is happening to the services in their communities as the budget cuts are rolled out.

A similar message came from the giant Public Service Alliance of Canada Wednesday in a pre-budget event on Parliament Hill. The union brought a cast of front-line public servants who work for Service Canada, Veterans Affairs, the Coast Guard and Canada Food Inspection Agency. They warned that spending cuts are already affecting services and more will jeopardize Canada's food and maritime safety and leave seniors, veterans and other vulnerable Canadians at risk.

PSAC launched its own social media campaign in December built around a series of bizarre web-based commercials that featured a giant squirrel wreaking havoc with public servants trying to do their jobs. The YouTube ads have had more than 350,000 hits to date.

All the unions have criticized the government for refusing to give information about the cuts, which will be unrolled over the next year. They argue Canadians won't even know what services are affected until the cuts are implemented and public servants have received pink slips.

“We're going to see services eliminated and no one will know about it until you actually try and go and use those services. That's not the way to run the operation,” said PSAC president John Gordon.

The campaigns are also aimed at countering government claims that unions are only interested in saving their members' jobs. Treasury Board President Tony Clement has taken swipes at unions as “self-interested” and run by “big union bosses” who are aligned with the NDP and only worry about saving jobs.

Ian Lee, a professor at Carleton University's Sprott School of Business, said the campaigns are merging unions' concerns over their workers' interests, such as losing jobs, with criticism of the government's policies.

He said PSAC, which represents a large number of blue- and white-collar jobs and is the most militant of the 18 federal unions, has long challenged government policies, but it's a first for the unions representing white-collar workers, who have historically shunned anything to do with politics or policy debates.

The first break with that tradition came this year when PIPSC joined the Canadian Labour Congress.

Professionals Serving Canadians is led by:

- Association of Justice Counsel.
- Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada.
- Canadian Association of Professional Employees.
- Professional Association of Foreign Service Officers.
- Association of Canadian Financial Officers.
- Canadian Federal Pilots Association.

© Copyright (c) The Ottawa Citizen