



# Privatization: Our History

Why we oppose privatization

## What you should know about... the attack on public services



### Remembering the 1980s:

**"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."  
-- George Santayana**

The current Saskatchewan Party government was elected only after pledging not to privatize public services. Here is why Saskatchewan people need this commitment from any political party.

SGEU has had some tough experiences in the past. During the Devine government years (1982-1991), SGEU lost 4,000 members due to cutbacks, early retirement and privatization. Valuable public services were lost. Many were never re-gained.

This is a brief summary of key events in the era of Grant Devine's Progressive Conservative party, the predecessor of the current Saskatchewan Party.

## **1982 -- Saskatchewan Election**

**April** - Grant Devine and his Progressive Conservatives defeat the Allan Rock NDP government. Hundreds of civil servants fired. Most were senior non-union positions.



**July** - Legislature recalled to legislate striking SGEU Cancer Clinic workers back to work. They were fighting for wage parity with other health care workers.

"Economic Recovery Program" announced. Public sector wages are to be kept 1% behind the rate of inflation. Fur marketing board abolished.

## **1983 - The Attack Begins**

SaskMedia dissolved - 24 jobs lost. 157 highways workers laid off.

Trade Union Act amended to strengthen employer rights and weaken union rights.

## **1984 - Roads and Parks**

**May** - 237 more Highways workers laid off. Department's road building capacity dismantled. Government highways equipment worth \$40 million auctioned off for \$6 million. Work given to private contractors.

Provincially-owned campgrounds, condos, golf courses, cabins, ski-hills and restaurants in the park system sold or leased to private operators on highly favourable terms.

Crop insurance sales contracted to private agents. These "sweetheart" contracts cost taxpayers millions. Patronage rampant.

SaskWater Corporation created and peeled off from public service. Government de-certified 100 members of SGEU by exempting the Corporation from provisions in the Trade Union Act which ensures that union rights are transferred when employees are transferred to another employer.

Court reporting privatized, affecting 15 workers.

## **1985 - 1986 No Rights**

SGEU begins rotating strikes to preserve integrity of hiring system in the public service and stop patronage, retain reclassified jobs and oppose wage restraints.

**January 1986**, the government legislates SGEU workers back to work. In doing so, they invoke the notwithstanding clause of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Saskatchewan was the first province to use the exemption clause of Canada's constitution. The collective "agreement" became a piece of legislation only.

Devine and Progressive Conservatives re-elected with fewer seats. NDP win a higher percentage of the vote.

SaskOil privatized.

### **1987 - Attacks on Children's Health and Battered Women**

Provincial budget cut core funding to community agencies like women's shelters and crisis units. Women's shelters cut between 1.5% to 14.5%. John Howard Society cut 25%. Canadian Mental Health Association cut 30%. Saskatoon Crisis Intervention cut 10%.

Public sector wages frozen. Public sector jobs cut. 561 vacant positions eliminated. 1,200 early retirements and 407 employees fired.

School-based Dental Program eliminated. 411 SGEU dental therapist and support staff fired. These workers, most of them women, worked in 578 clinics in 338 communities providing preventative dental care to children. Their work was "transferred to the private sector." Saskatchewan Court later ruled that the Provincial Government and the College of Dental Surgeons were guilty of conspiring to eliminate the program so their own members could get the work. Dental equipment was sold to the dentists.

Department of Public Participation established to co-ordinate and supervise all privatization activities.

Crowns up for sale: SaskMinerals, Sask. Mining Development Corp., general insurance side of SGI, SaskComp, parts of SaskTel, SaskEnergy, Potash Corp. of Sask., Sask. Government Printers, Sask. Forest Products.

### **1988 - 1989 Crisis in Post-secondary Education**

Newly created SIAST decertified, as was SaskWater, by exempting the Corporation from the Trade Union Act. SGEU re-organizes and is certified at SIAST. One hundred and forty-two instructors and 74 non-teaching jobs were eliminated in the process. Private vocational schools increase. Rotating strikes held to obtain first SIAST contract.

Privatization of liquor stores stopped by SGEU campaign.

Potash Corp. of Saskatchewan sold.

## 1990-1991 Fair Share

"Fair Share Saskatchewan" announced. Government plans to de-centralize government services. More than 100 departments, commissions and corporations to be transferred from Regina to 100 - 200 communities. SGEU not consulted; thousands of members affected. Court action by SGEU delays Fair Share until after election.

Government proposes selling off Sask Energy. NDP opposition walks out of Legislature, shutting it down. Polls show public opposes sale of the crown by 66%. Legislature opens and bill to sell Sask Energy dies.

**1991** provincial budget - 352 public service jobs abolished.

October 1991 - NDP led by Roy Romanow defeats Progressive Conservatives in provincial election.

## Reflections

None of the downsizing and contracting out resulted in better services in health, education or social services. Selling off public assets made no dent in the deficits the PCs ran up and no new or better jobs were created. Let's learn from these lessons and prevent another era of cuts and sell-offs.



*Book Sources: Privatizing a Province (Pitsula\Wilson), Devine Rule in Saskatchewan (Biggs\Stobbs, eds.)*

[Comm./anti-privatization/research/Privatization in the 1980s](http://Comm./anti-privatization/research/Privatization in the 1980s)