

Vancouver city workers strike nearly two weeks old

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Inside city workers in Vancouver, British Columbia have been on strike for nearly two weeks. The 2,800 members of Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 15 walked out September 27 after Vancouver City Council rejected the union's latest contract proposal the previous evening. Local 15 represents planners, support staff, clerks and parking enforcement officials.

Members of CUPE Local 1004—1,700 outside workers (sanitation, sewer and water workers, also truck drivers and equipment operators)—are honoring the picket lines. As a result, most city services, including garbage collection, water hook-up, road repairs, the operation of community centers, have been affected.

On October 2 the city announced that it had reached a tentative contract settlement with Local 1004's bargaining committee. While 1004's members are continuing to respect the picket lines, the tentative agreement reached by union leaders is a blow to the strikers and puts added pressure on them to return to work on conditions favorable to management.

The principal issue in dispute is the length and character of the workweek. Two years ago the city council unilaterally rescinded a four-day week that had been in place for city hall employees for decades. The union is demanding the return of the compressed work schedule. City council, backed by business interests, including real estate developers in particular, is standing fast.

Local 15 President Rick Gates has been at pains to explain that the union has “bent over backwards” and “is going out of its way” to make proposals that address management's concerns about labor flexibility, but all to no avail.

Members of Local 15 and 1004 are picketing

Vancouver's City Hall, among other locations. I spoke to a couple of members of Local 1004 outside City Hall.

Blain Spencer explained that he had been locked out by the city after his local's membership refused to cross picket lines. He works for the parks department, in the city's renowned Stanley Park. The essential issue, he commented, was the city's desire to get more flexible work schedules and slash overtime. “You know that it's about saving money,” he said.

As is the case with governments everywhere, the Vancouver city administration has already taken measures to cut down on full-time employment and increasingly contracts out services, in street repair, asphaltting and garbage collection in particular. Another Local 1004 member, Clint, remarked that “less and less city garbage is collected by city workers. Non-union companies are doing more and more.”

Spencer said, “If we don't stick up for ourselves, we're finished. Management is very top-heavy. The city government is sort of like the old Socreds [Social Credit]. It's the right-wing slate. Privatization is on their agenda.”

We got onto the subject of political matters, and the provincial NDP [social-democratic] government. Spencer declared: “I voted NDP all my life. I'll never vote for them again.” But his reasons were confused to say the least. At first he began to inveigh against their failure to maintain “law and order.” By that he meant, as he explained, the government's inability to do anything about the problem of heroin addiction, which is a major social issue in Vancouver, as well as the Pacific Northwest in the US. He complained about the NDP's “soft touch” and suggested that “a heroin addict's got more rights than a working man. I've had 11 break-ins at my house.”

As we talked, however, a more complex picture emerged. He acknowledged that behind the rise in heroin addiction lay economic and social problems. “I’m a recovered addict myself. I worked in the forestry industry. I know the problems. But it was different 20 or 30 years ago. Now there’s nowhere to go.” A future of low-wage jobs was not much of a prospect, I suggested. “Low-wage jobs?” he asked rhetorically, “*No jobs!* We all have to have a purpose in life. What’s the situation for younger people? There’s no self-esteem in it. Society is going down the drain.”

Spencer went on, “No one cares, no one gives a damn any more. I grew up in South Vancouver. There were doctors, milkmen, all sorts of people. Now the middle class is being squeezed out of existence. I’m class poor. I support myself by doing various things. I’m not here for the money. If I made \$30 an hour it wouldn’t be enough. The money just goes. The wages mean nothing. I’m here simply for the benefits, dental and the rest. And not for me. My teeth are rotting away, but I go without so maybe my son will have something.”

Clint, a younger man, who has worked for the city for nine years, added: “When my father was working, that was enough. Now two or three people need to work to support a family.”

In his comments Spencer combined acute perceptions with illusions and even reactionary conceptions picked up uncritically from the media. On the one hand, he expressed unequivocal hostility for the wealthy and privileged and bemoaned the decayed state of the labor movement; on the other, he blamed illegal immigrants and drug addicts for a good many of the social problems. As I prepared to end the conversation, however, he made one final remark, “Capitalism doesn’t work, you know that.” I told him he wasn’t going to get an argument from me.



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