

British Columbia suspends health care workers' basic union rights

Keith Jones
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British Columbia's Liberal government rushed through legislation last week that imposes new contracts on almost 40,000 health care workers and strips them of the legal right to mount any job action till 2004.

Nurses at more than a dozen hospitals walked off the job last Wednesday and Thursday in protest against the Liberals' Bill 15. But the B.C. Nurses Union (BCNU) instructed nurses to return to work after the Hospital Employers' Association filed a Labour Relations Board cease-and-desist order with the B.C. Supreme Court.

At a press conference Friday, BCNU leaders also withdrew their threat to organize a mass resignation of nurses. Letters of resignation from 5,100 nurses had been provided to the union that were potentially to be forwarded to their respective employers en masse.

In explaining the union's about-face, BCNU President Debra McPherson said the Hospital Employers' Association (HEA) had threatened the union with legal action on the grounds that a mass resignation would constitute an illegal work stoppage. Although legally autonomous, the HEA is subject to the financial dictates of the province and functions, for all intents and purposes, as an arm of the government.

The Liberals, for their part, had vowed that they would thwart any mass resignation, although without specifying how. Earlier this month Conrad Black's *National Post*, urged the Liberals to mimic US President Ronald Reagan's response to the 1981 air traffic controllers' strike and fire any nurse who indicated a readiness to resign.

"We don't have a collective agreement," BCNU President Debra McPherson told Friday's press conference. "We have imposed conditions of slavery and confinement ..."

Under the Liberal-imposed contract, nurses' wages

will rise an average 23.5 percent over the next three years, but this is partially offset by benefit rollbacks and an increase in the number of years of seniority needed to reach the maximum pay scale. Other health care professionals are to receive much smaller wage increases, ranging from 5.5 percent over three years—less than the anticipated inflation rate—to 14.25 percent.

Like their counterparts elsewhere in Canada, B.C. health care workers were subjected to successive rounds of "wage austerity" in the 1990s and consequently suffered a substantial decline in real wages.

Moreover, during the same period, massive government spending cuts led to a sharp increase in health care workers' workload and a proliferation of temporary employment contracts. Angered and frustrated by the deterioration in their working conditions, thousands of nurses and other Canadian health care professionals have emigrated to the US. Others, emotionally and physically drained by the ever-mounting demands placed upon them, have left the health care field altogether.

In B.C. and across Canada, hospitals now face a chronic shortage of nurses and many other types of skilled personnel. When the B.C. nurses mounted an overtime ban, the Hospital Employers Association pressed the government to declare it illegal—which the Liberals soon did—arguing that hospitals cannot meet patients' "essential" needs unless nurses routinely work 10- and 12-hour shifts.

B.C. Premier Gordon Campbell and Finance Minister Gary Collins have justified the suspension of the health care workers' elementary trade union rights and the government's imposition of contracts by claiming that the province has no more money. Yet since coming to

power this June, the Liberals have slashed personal income and corporate taxes by more than \$2 billion.

In seeking office, the Liberals lyingly claimed that they could slash taxes and balance the provincial budget without making cuts to health care or education. Now, just three months into his premiership, Campbell is openly proclaiming the current universal public health care system “unsustainable.”

At Friday’s press conference, BCNU President McPherson said her union will work with others to develop a long-term plan to fight the Campbell government. “We have declared war on the government,” she declared. “There’s no question about it.”

Such statements are nothing less than a self-indictment. In tandem with the B.C. Federation of Labour, the BCNU for a decade suppressed working class opposition to the Liberals’ New Democratic Party predecessors, even as the social democrats slashed public and social services and attacked union rights. Then, when it became evident that the Liberals, having batted off the popular discontent with the NDP, were poised to come to power, the BC unions signaled their readiness to work with a Campbell-led government.

While the nurses’ union leadership used bluster and demagoguery to distract attention from its capitulation before the Liberals, the response of the union representatives of the 14,000 medical technicians targeted by Bill 15 was muted. Last month, the Health Sciences Association led a brief walkout in defiance of a government-imposed 60-day suspension of health workers’ rights to strike and work-to-rule, then ordered a return to work after the employer association obtained a court injunction.

The actions of both the BCNU and the Health Sciences Association leaders conform to a pattern in Canada’s public sector dating back two decades. Union leaders have frequently mounted brief work stoppages in defiance of anti-strike laws and government-imposed contracts, the better to convince their members that further struggle is futile. Liberal, Tory, Parti Québécois, Social Credit and NDP governments, meanwhile, have relied on the union bureaucracy to police their anti-union laws, thus avoiding the danger of a politically destabilizing confrontation between the state and striking workers.

That said, it must be recognized that there is a

widening legislative assault on trade union and democratic rights. Nova Scotia’s Tory provincial government has vowed to bring forward legislation this fall permanently stripping health care workers and possibly other “essential” public sector workers of the right to strike. New Brunswick Premier Bernard Lord has indicated his Tory government may go the same route. “We’re hearing more and more people suggesting that there should be no right to strike for people who work in nursing homes, people that work in hospitals,” declared Lord last weekend.

In just three months in office, B.C.’s Liberal government has already passed three separate bills suspending basic union rights of health care workers and Vancouver-area transit workers. And the Liberals have pledged that they will soon table a bill declaring education an “essential service,” thus effectively banning strikes by teachers and school support staff.

Behind this legislative assault lies big business’s demand that governments make public services—and most importantly health care and education—“more productive” through the introduction of user fees and other “market mechanisms” and through outright privatization. By stripping public sector workers of their elementary trade union rights, governments seek a free hand in imposing job cuts and increases in workload and aim to silence a potentially powerful battalion in the working class opposition to the dismantling of public services.

See Also:

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