

Canada: British Columbia to slash civil service by one-third

Guy Charron
14 December 2001

British Columbia's six-month old Liberal government is moving at breakneck speed to ram through a right-wing agenda modelled after the Ontario Tories' "Common Sense Revolution." Responding to big business complaints that the 1990s were "a lost decade" for British Columbia, Gordon Campbell's Liberal government has slashed corporate and personal income taxes, illegalized teacher strikes, and introduced anti-union amendments to the province's labor code. Now it has begun implementing massive cuts to public and social services.

The Liberals have announced that they will reduce the provincial government workforce by 11,500 or one-third over the next three years. While some jobs will be eliminated through early retirement and attrition, Finance Minister Gary Collins says 6,500 workers will likely have to be laid off. These jobs cuts are on top of those announced in 1996 by the previous New Democratic Party government—cuts which left BC with the second smallest per capita government workforce in the country.

Collins claims that a projected \$2 billion provincial budget deficit in each of the next two years has left the Liberals with no alternative. But the Liberal government is itself the principal cause of BC's fiscal crisis, having announced on the very first day it took office a plan to cut corporate and personal income taxes by \$3 billion over the next two years. Adding to the financial shortfall is the economic slump. Since April, BC has lost 50,000 jobs.

The civil service job cuts are only the first stage in a vast reorganization of government, which will involve massive reductions in services, privatization, and the gutting of environmental and workplace regulations.

A key target in this campaign will be the wages and working conditions of tens of thousands of hospital and

other public sector workers who are not directly on the government payroll, but whose salaries are paid out of the provincial budget. Since taking office, the Liberals have repeatedly complained of "inflexible collective agreements" and it is expected that if they cannot cow union leaders into "voluntarily" reopening these agreements, the government will resort to legislation to rewrite them.

All ministries, with the exception of Health and Education, have been ordered to reduce their spending by 35 percent by 2004.

Needless to say, the burden of the Liberals' cuts will fall on the most vulnerable sections of society. With great fanfare, the government has announced a campaign to "re-integrate" welfare recipients into the workforce. One of its key provisions is that all mothers who want to continue receiving welfare must begin actively seeking work once their youngest child reaches the age of one. In a similar vein, the Liberals have cut the minimum wage for youth entering the labor force from \$8 to \$6 an hour.

During last spring's election campaign, the Liberals claimed that they would protect health care from their planned retrenchment of government operations. But Health Care Minister Colin Hansen has announced that beginning in 2002 the government will de-list certain medical services from the public health care plan and reduce drug insurance coverage for seniors and welfare recipients. These measures will, according to the government, save \$130 million a year.

Hansen and Premier Campbell have emerged as key spokesmen in the big business drive to dismantle the national, universal public health insurance scheme, Medicare. Says Hansen, "The only way that we will be able to meet the needs of British Columbians and ensure that patients get access to medically necessary

care is to go through some structural changes.”

The Liberals are also pressing forward with their election pledge to eliminate one-third of all government regulations by the next election in June 2004. In explaining the thinking animating the Liberals’ review of all 400,000 provincial regulations, Labour Minister Graham Bruce claimed that during the last decade “the attitude in this province has virtually been hostile to business whether it is small, medium or large. We want to turn that around.”

Bruce says he favors a system of workplace regulation in which employers are responsible for regulating themselves. “Peer pressure” could be amplified, adds Bruce, by the publication of the names of companies that are repeat offenders, a practice he calls “shame the bosses.”

It was the social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP) and the trade union bureaucracy that paved the Liberals’ road to power. Elected in 1991, under conditions of a major slump and after a decade of turbulent working class struggles against the Social Credit regimes of Bill Bennett and Bill Vander Zalm, the New Democrats junked even their timid reformist program and imposed capitalist austerity.

Now, recognizing that the Liberals’ policies will produce major class conflicts, the social democrats are trying to reposition themselves, the better to contain and derail the mounting working class opposition. BC NDP leader Joy MacPhail, who was a key cabinet minister in both the Mike Harcourt and Glen Clark NDP governments, is claiming to have rediscovered “NDP values.” Trying to pass off the NDP’s record as an enforcer of the dictates of big business with a glib phrase, MacPhail recently opined, “We slipped not when we fought for working people, but when we forgot them.”



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact