Canada: Teachers take action against B.C. government

Lee Parsons
29 January 2002

The Liberal government of British Columbia last week launched a legislative assault against workers in the province, imposing a contract on 45,000 teachers and tearing up agreements affecting over 100,000 public sector workers. Teachers responded immediately by announcing a one day strike on Monday in protest against the government action.

This latest assault comes only a month after the announcement of massive budget cuts and the slashing of up to one third of public service jobs over the next three years in British Columbia. The Liberal government of Gordon Campbell has launched a big business offensive against workers since coming to power last June, attacking union rights and cutting taxes in answer to the demands of big business.

Premier Gordon Campbell, who was at the provincial premier's conference in Vancouver when the bill imposing a new contract on teachers was passed on Friday, recalled the legislature for an emergency session on the weekend to introduce legislation affecting health-care and other public sector workers. In addition to the contract legislation, a bill was passed returning authority over class sizes to local school boards, flying in the face of teacher demands in ongoing contract talks. Over 500 workers showed up to demonstrate against the government at the provincial legislature on Saturday.

The one-day strike by teachers is in defiance of legislation passed last year by the provincial Liberals, outlawing strikes by teachers, and could be followed by further actions. The British Columbia Teachers Federation (BCTF) were nevertheless reluctant to say whether teachers would continue to withdraw from extra-curricular activities once they returned to work. They have said that they will stage rallies in 36 centrs across the province to publicise their fight.

The government imposed the contract in face of growing support for teacher demands, particularly by students, in their contract battle with the province. Demonstrations against the government had been growing in recent days as thousands of high school students in a number of communities joined the protest.

The new contract provides a total wage increase of 7.5 percent over three years, far below the 18 percent teachers were seeking. In addition to smaller class sizes, teachers had been seeking guarantees for specialised and special needs teaching positions. Teachers had been in negotiations with the government since their contract expired last June.

The other new law, Bill 29, the Health and Social Services Delivery Improvement Act, replaces existing agreements made under the previous NDP government, gutting job security provisions and severance benefits. Union leaders representing health-care workers have claimed that the government's actions are unconstitutional and have vowed to fight them in the courts. At a news conference on Saturday, Chris Alnutt of the Hospital Employees Union (HEU) declared, "We're going to go all the way.... This piece of legislation is draconian and unacceptable in a democratic society."

It is the fourth contract the Liberals have imposed on workers since coming to power, and by the premier's own admission breaks election promises. The Liberals hold all but two of the 79 seats in the province and have a free hand in legislating their right-wing agenda following the massive defeat of the NDP in the last election.

© World Socialist Web Site

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site