

British Columbia: Mass protest against gutting of public and social services

A correspondent
26 February 2002

More than 30,000 trade unionists, students, welfare recipients, and other working people marched on the British Columbia legislature Saturday, February 23, to protest against the class war policies of the provincial Liberal government.

Elected last spring, the Liberals have set about gutting public and social services, while dramatically reducing taxes on business and the well-to-do. Before accounting for inflation, government spending is to be cut by 8 percent per year. The provincial civil service is to be slashed by one-third. Welfare benefits are being reduced and new provisions introduced to restrict access to welfare. The Liberals have lifted a freeze on post-secondary tuitions. And they have enacted a battery of antiunion laws, imposing contracts on teachers and other workers and eliminating the job security protection for more than 100,000 health care and other public sector workers.

Saturday's demonstration was one of the largest protests ever mounted at the BC Legislature, which is located in Victoria, a ferry-ride from Vancouver and BC's Lower Mainland. The turnout is indicative of a groundswell of opposition to the Liberals.

But the march organizers, principally the leaders of the BC Federation of Labour and its affiliates, are determined to smother the opposition movement. In so far as they offered any plan for further action, it was that workers should seek to press the Liberals to reverse course, by writing and lobbying their Liberal Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs), and work to defeat the Liberals at the next provincial election in 2005! Several also promoted a "recall" campaign. (The previous government established a procedure under which voters can "recall" individual MLAs, i.e., force a by-election, by getting a substantial portion of the riding's electorate to sign a recall petition.)

Speakers at the demonstration included, the presidents of the BC Federation of Labour, the Hospital Employees Union, the BC Teachers' Federation, and Industrial, Wood and Allied Workers of Canada (IWA-Canada), and representatives of students, seniors and native and women's organizations.

Significantly, there was no speaker from the New Democratic Party (NDP). This is no doubt because the union leaders recognize that the social-democrats are rightly hated by many workers. (After a decade in office, the NDP was reduced in last year's election to just two seats in the legislature.) But by keeping the NDP off the platform, the union bureaucrats were also sending a message to the Liberals that the protest movement is "non-partisan" and that they are eager to work with the government, if only it gives them a greater role in the restructuring of the public sector.

BC Federation of Labour President Jim Sinclair said all 77 Liberal MLAs had been invited to the demonstration or 13 smaller rallies in other parts of the province, but all had declined the invitation.

One of the principal criticisms the union leadership has made of the Liberals is that their confrontationist politics are threatening business investment. Said BC Government Employees and Service Union President George Heyman, "If this government doesn't listen to us, there will be increased confrontation and the conflict will get deeper. Investment will go down and the economy will suffer."

Some in the crowd of 30,000 chanted for a general strike. But the head of the province's largest industrial union, IWA-Canada President Dave Haggard, was quick to dismiss a one-day protest strike, let alone a larger action.

In a post-demonstration interview with the *Victoria Times-Colonist*, he declared, "I don't support a general

strike. I have over 8,000 or 9,000 people laid off today and we're trying to get them back to work. I don't know why the hell I'd pull them off the job for something that has no end to it. How do you go on a one-day general strike and change the government's mind? That's dreaming in Technicolor."



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