

British Columbia government pressing forward with class war agenda

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British Columbia's Liberal government has emerged as the spearhead of corporate Canada's assault on the working class. Since the beginning of 2002, it has:

- * Begun implementing a plan to cut the province's civil service by 12,000 or one-third over the next three years.

- * Rushed legislation through an emergency session of the provincial legislature that imposes contracts on 45,000 public school teachers and empowers school boards and colleges to dictate teacher-workload and class sizes;

- * Used a similar emergency law to rob tens of thousands of health care and social service workers of job security protection and bumping rights;

- * Announced welfare "reform" under which those deemed employable will have their benefits cut and be conscripted into workfare or training schemes;

- * Introduced a three-year austerity plan that freezes health and education spending at current levels—in reality a multi-billion dollar cut because of inflation and population growth—and imposes an average 25 percent spending cut on all other government departments;

- * Scrapped a freeze on university and college tuitions and announced that henceforth the province's post-secondary institutions will be free to set their own fees;

- * Signalled, through the release of a discussion paper, impending pro-employer changes to the provincial labor code, including third-party supervision of strike votes, increased power for the labor board to declare workers "essential employees," and adding promoting corporate "competitiveness" to the labor code's objectives. Big business calculates the last-mentioned change will provide it with a lever to push for changes in work-rules and job security provisions.

Although many of the Liberals' measures are patterned after those taken by other governments, especially the Tory governments of Ontario and Alberta, in some important respects they are more threatening to working people.

For example, when the Liberals' welfare reform is adopted, BC will become the first province to set a limit on how long those deemed employable can collect "last resort"

benefits. Persons without children will only be eligible to draw social assistance for a total of two years in any five-year period. Those with families will have their benefits cuts by 11 percent, once they reach the 24-month limit.

Or take health care. The elimination of job security provisions from health care workers' contracts lays the legal groundwork for the downsizing of health care services, through hospital closures and mergers, mass layoffs, and privatization of "non-medical" jobs. According to a briefing paper prepared for Health Services Minister Colin Hansen and leaked to the Hospital Employees' Union, the government anticipates 13,600 full-time positions will be eliminated by 2005 through the contracting out of hospital housekeeping, food preparation and laundry services. The document says that many of those who lose their jobs will likely be hired by the new private contractors, but at wage rates 30 percent below the prevailing union rate. The document further states that 7,500 other hospital jobs will be eliminated through cuts in services, cuts that will likely result in 10,000 operations being delayed in the coming year alone: "Wait lists will grow. Hospital beds will close. Facilities may be closed or converted..."

However, even this document does not fully disclose the government's intentions. BC Premier Gordon Campbell has joined Alberta's Ralph Klein and Ontario's Mike Harris in calling for new sources of revenue to be found for the health care system—a euphemism for user fees and the de-listing from the public health care scheme of certain medical services and procedures. Last month's Throne Speech declared that the BC government's current health care spending is "unsustainable," then warned of "major structural changes that will not be very palatable to many and will challenge us all to accept some short-term sacrifices..."

The Liberals' class war agenda—their redistribution of wealth from the poor and working people to the upper middle-class, the rich and super-rich—is well-illustrated by their changes to the tax system. Last June, on their first day in office, the Liberals introduced a 25 percent cut in personal

income taxes, heavily skewed in favor of the well-to-do. Later they slashed corporate taxes. The personal income and corporate tax cuts, which will total \$2.2 billion per year when fully implemented during the 2002-03 fiscal year, have greatly exacerbated the province's fiscal crisis—the same crisis that Liberals point to when insisting that there is no alternative to the massive reduction of public and social services.

Yet while the tax cuts are inviolable, the Liberals are quite prepared to impose increases in consumption taxes and other charges that fall more heavily on working people. Not only is the government introducing or raising fees for a whole slate of services; in last month's budget it raised the provincial sales tax by .5 percent to 7.5 percent and hiked the premiums British Columbians must pay to participate in the provincial health insurance scheme care by 50 percent.

Needless to say, the Liberals' actions have provoked widespread anger. According to a public opinion poll, between September and February support for the government fell from 70 to 43 percent. Last month, saw one of the largest demonstrations in the history of the provincial capital, Victoria.

Campbell, upon returning from the World Economic Forum in New York City, made reference to the different reception his big business policies have been accorded by working people and the titans of international capital. Said Campbell of the Forum, "There at least, people have been very encouraging about what we've done and why we've done it. They understand it."

But while there is deep-rooted, popular opposition to the Liberals' class war program, no worker should have the slightest illusion as to the fate of the opposition movement being mounted by the BC Federation of Labour (BCFL). Campaign BC is aimed at preventing a working-class political challenge to the Liberal government.

For a decade, the union officialdom suppressed the class struggle claiming the New Democratic Party (NDP) provincial government was a bulwark against the Liberals and the right. In fact, the NDP paved the way for the coming to power of Campbell and the Liberals by cutting public and social services, imposing wage restraint, and echoing the right's law and order and anti-refugee rhetoric.

Now the BCFL leaders are urging workers to try to pressure the Liberals to reverse their right-wing policies, while working to defeat them at the polls in 2005.

The truth is the union bureaucrats and the social-democratic politicians of the NDP agree with the Liberals that public and social services must be subordinated to corporate profitability. Thus they have attacked Campbell for undermining business confidence by not upholding the sanctity of contracts—a reference to the Liberals' reopening

of collective agreements—and for turning labor relations in BC back to the late 1980s, when according to BCGEU President George Heyman, "BC had a bad reputation among potential investors ... because it was a place of conflict, confrontation and strife."

The very first point of the BC Federation of Labour's 8-point program "to boost the economy, while protecting health, education and public services" is a call for a tripartite summit of business, the unions and government. The third point is a call for the Liberals to defer—not even scrap—their tax breaks to the "wealthy and big business."

The BCFL's 8-point program makes no mention of the cuts to welfare, although they are a key element of the Liberal program, both fiscally and politically. Of the \$1.9 billion in program spending cuts announced by the liberals to date, \$580 million or almost a third is to come from the budget of the Human Resources Ministry. Like Ontario's Mike Harris, Campbell is seeking to undermine the wages of all working people and deflect social tensions by victimizing the poor.

Over the course of the past two decades workers have repeatedly come forward to challenge the progressive dismantling of the welfare state by big business provincial and federal governments. The unions and NDP have worked in unison to constrain these opposition movements to protest actions, but when they have threatened to escape their control—as in the 1983 Operation Solidarity movement in BC and the 1997 Ontario teachers' strike—they have torpedoed them.

The BC Liberals' assault on public and social services and trade union rights underscores the need for the working class to break free from the straitjacket of parliamentary protest and collective bargaining and constitute itself as an independent political force, advancing its own program to reorganize economic life based on human need not profit.



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