

British Columbia: Ferry workers defy government strikebreaking

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Forty-six-hundred British Columbia ferry workers are striking in defiance of a provincial Liberal government back-to-work order, placing them on a collision course with a right-wing government that has mounted sweeping attacks on public and social services and workers' rights. Already, the ferry workers face the threat of punitive legal sanctions and the deployment of strikebreakers.

On Tuesday, the Liberal government imposed an 80-day "cooling-off" period in the contract dispute between the ferry workers and BC Ferry Services, a provincially controlled corporation that the Liberals intend to transform into a shell company through contracting out and private-public partnerships. Under the Liberals' cooling-off order, the ferry workers have been stripped of their legal right to strike until March, although during their less than two day-old strike they had been respecting Essential Services Legislation requirements that they provide between 40 and 50 percent of regular service.

The British Columbia Ferry and Marine Workers' Union (BCFMWU) instructed its members to return to work when the cooling-off order was promulgated, but said that if the order was not rescinded by noon Wednesday it would call a total strike.

BCFMWU officials met with Labour Minister Graham Bruce Wednesday morning, but predictably the government refused to budge an inch. Shortly after the noon Wednesday deadline, the ferry workers walked off the job.

The ferry company, which was created last March under the Liberals' Bill C-18 (the Coastal Ferry Act), is demanding massive contract concessions, including significant wage rollbacks, a longer work week, job cuts and an increased ability to contract out services normally performed by the unionized ferry workers. In

this last demand, in particular, the ferry company is acting on behalf of the provincial government, which under Bill 18 specifically instructed the company to seek "alternate business models"

and has proclaimed privatization and contracting out to be central to its self-proclaimed mission of reducing the size of government.

By way of a pretext for Tuesday's back-to-work order, the company and the government have alleged that the union, in its limited job action, was not fully meeting the essential service levels dictated earlier by the provincial labour board. But in reality, management had been turning away the normal crews and insisting on different, less senior staff, in a transparent attempt to provoke the direct confrontation with the union that is now taking place.

That the government, through the ferry company, has taken this openly provocative course, despite the fact that the BCFMWU has offered much in the way of concessions to the company, including virtually complete scheduling flexibility, is not at all surprising.

The confrontation with the ferry workers is the latest installment in the BC Liberals' assault on the working class. Since coming to power in the spring of 2001, the Liberals have imposed contracts on 45,000 public school teachers, carried out massive layoffs and restructuring in the health-care sector, and passed a whole battery of regressive legislation attacking unions and workers' compensation, weakening employment standards, and lengthening the workday. Early in the new year, thousands of welfare recipients are threatened with the loss of any benefits under a new Liberal provision that limits "able-bodied" persons to receiving welfare for no more than two years in any five-year period.

BC Ferry Services obtained an order from the BC

Labour Relations Board late Wednesday that proclaimed the strike illegal and banned all picketing near company property. This is a prelude to going to the courts to obtain an injunction ordering an immediate end to the strike. Such action would then allow the union, union leaders and individual strikers to be threatened with punitive sanctions including massive fines and possibly jail terms.

Already, some right-wing voices have suggested that the government should follow the model set by Ronald Reagan with the PATCO air traffic controllers, and fire all of the striking ferry workers.

For his part, BC Ferry Services CEO David Hahn has threatened to deploy strikebreakers if the walkout does not end forthwith. “If they continue to stay out, we’ll look for other replacement crews,” Hahn told a press conference. In answer to a question, Hahn said firings are an option. “I think we get to that at some point,” he said.

The Liberal government and the corporate media are accusing the strikers of holding the 800,000 residents of Vancouver Island and the province’s economy “hostage.” But many workers in BC and across Canada can see through these claims. The government has deliberately provoked the confrontation with the ferry workers, intending to use them as an example, whether by coercing them into accepting massive concessions or by breaking their union outright.

The BCFMWU has been deluged with offers of support, but the union leadership—most importantly the BC Federation of Labour (BCFL)—has said nothing about what workers should do to assist the ferry workers’ struggle.

The class war agenda of the Liberal government of Gordon Campbell has provoked massive popular opposition. But the BCFL and the social-democratic NDP have squelched even a protest campaign against the government.



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