

British Columbia: Unions suppress ferry and forest strikes

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The union leadership has suppressed two pivotal strikes in British Columbia, inviting arbitrators to dictate their members' collective agreements and under terms set by the violently anti-working-class Liberal provincial government.

Last Friday morning, the BC Ferry and Marine Workers Unions (BCFMWU) torpedoed a strike that risked becoming an all-out confrontation between the working class and the Liberal regime.

Two days later, Dave Haggard, the president of the Industrial, Wood and Allied Workers Union (IWA), stood beside BC premier Gordon Campbell as he announced that his government would—with the union's support—enact emergency legislation to force an end to a three-week-old strike by 10,000 workers in BC's coastal forest industry. On Tuesday evening, the strikebreaking legislation became law.

For two days last week, the 4,600 ferry workers defied threats of fines, jail terms and the imminent deployment of strikebreakers, shutting down the ferry service that connects Vancouver Island with the mainland to protest against the Liberals' suspension of their right to strike. The corporate media denounced the strike, claiming it was ravaging the province's economy and disrupting the lives of tens of thousands of commuters and tourists. But the ferry workers were deluged by messages of support. Many workers hoped the strike would escalate into a general strike against the Campbell government, which since coming to power in June 2001 has made drastic social spending cuts, gutted labor and environmental standards, and created a mechanism to throw thousands off of welfare, while rewarding big business and the rich with steep tax cuts.

It was precisely the possibility of such an outcome that led the union bureaucracy to move decisively to

end the ferry workers' struggle. Under pressure from the British Columbia Federation of Labour (BCFL) and the ferry workers' parent union—the BC Government Employees Unions (BCGEU)—BCFMWU leaders accepted binding arbitration.

Of particular significance are the roles played by BCFL president Jim Sinclair and BCGEU president George Heyman, who joined the ferry worker negotiations after the illegal strike had entered its second full day. No doubt, these pillars of the BC labor bureaucracy made it clear that if the ferry workers continued their defiance and faced an all-out strikebreaking campaign by the Liberal government, they would be on their own.

This was underlined the comments of John Fryer, a past BCGEU general-secretary, former president of the National Unions of Public and General Employees, and current labor relations consultant to the World Bank. In an interview with the Canadian Press, Fryer disparaged the militancy of the ferry workers, then declared, "Jim [Sinclair] and George [Heyman] would be there to explain to them how labor relations works in British Columbia." Fryer suggested it was likely that the BC government had itself called on Sinclair and Heyman to intervene in the talks, so as to defuse the situation. "I believe that kind of thing has happened countless times in British Columbia."

The BCFMWU leaders have justified their capitulation—the membership was not even given the right to vote on the arbitration deal—on the grounds that the arbitrator is someone who listens attentively to the workers' grievances. BCFMWU president Jackie Miller declared, "What we will have at binding arbitration is the opportunity to actually have someone listen to our arguments. What we didn't have with the negotiating team for B.C. Ferries Services was any sort

of reciprocal dialogue from across the table other than ideology.”

This is poppycock. The arbitrator will have to work under the terms of the Coastal Ferry Act, the antiunion legislation that the Liberals adopted last March and which essentially privatizes the ferry service. The Liberals’ legislation goes so far as to explicitly require BC Ferries to contract out as much of its operations as possible, and mandates that the ferry operators return a rate of profit based on government bond rates plus a “risk” premium.

Section 26 of the Coastal Ferry Act explicitly states that the contents of the Act trump any and all collective agreements. In other words, irrespective of the collective agreement drawn up by the arbitrator, the ferry company will remain entirely free to pursue the contracting out of labor.

No sooner was the ferry strike over, than an emboldened Campbell vowed to introduce legislation permanently stripping the ferry workers of the right to strike. Said Campbell: “We can’t allow coastal communities to be held hostage as they were when this ferry service was closed down. We have to be sure that kind of thing can’t happen again.”

The union bureaucracy’s suppression of the forest workers’ strike was even more blatant, for here the union officialdom could not even point to the imminent threat of fines and jailings. Rather, it was the IWA leadership that invited the government to strip its members of their right to strike and impose binding arbitration, for it feared that otherwise it would not be able to coerce its members into accepting the massive contract concessions demanded by the industry.

Under Bill 99, the Coastal Forest Industry Dispute Settlement Act, an arbitrator will dictate the terms of the forest workers’ contract, should the IWA and the employers not “negotiate” a settlement by the end of May. Moreover, the legislation stipulates that any imposed settlement must be “consistent with the economic viability and competitiveness of the coastal forest industry in both the short and long term.”

The employer bargaining agent, Forest Industrial Relations (FIR), is claiming that its labor costs are as much as 70 percent higher than at sawmills in the US northwest. As a minimum, it is demanding a 15 percent cut in labor costs from the IWA.

The union leadership has repeatedly said it is ready to

work with the employers to make the industry more productive. But it proved unable to prevent the outbreak of walkouts and then a full-scale strike, when the FIR, impatient at the pace of negotiations, unilaterally imposed concessions, including reduced vacation benefits, greater flexibility in scheduling, and no overtime pay for weekend work.

Needless to say, the striking forest workers were not even consulted before Haggard and the IWA leadership agreed to let the Liberals take away their right to strike and imprison them in a mediation-binding arbitration process designed to ensure that the employers extract sweeping contract concessions.

Even the social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP)—which for decades has enjoyed the closest relations with the IWA leadership—has felt forced to condemn Haggard, so blatant is his role as an agent of the forest bosses and the right-wing Liberal government. “As union members see the onerous nature of this legislation and how much they are losing...they, too, will have questions for their union leadership,” warned NDP House leader Joy MacPhail

Two presidents of Vancouver Island IWA locals have also criticized the union leadership, claiming that they had not agreed to binding arbitration, only mediation. Haggard has responded by accusing them of lying. “It’s just not true. They all knew it [the legislation] was coming, they were canvassed and talked to, and the majority [of local union officials] supported it.”



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