

British Columbia: State assault on hospital workers provokes mass walkouts

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Tens if not hundreds of thousands of workers in British Columbia are expected to stay off the job today in a show of support for 43,000 hospital workers who have been defying a draconian strikebreaking law since last Thursday. In addition to illegalizing their four-day-old strike, BC's Bill 37 imposes a new contract on the hospital workers that cuts their pay by 15 percent, lengthens their workweek, and gives the provincial-government-controlled health authorities the unfettered right to contract out their jobs.

The outpouring of popular support for the hospital workers arises from the recognition that the three-year-old provincial Liberal government of Gordon Campbell is mounting a frontal assault on all working people. The Liberals have gutted funding for public and social services, slashed welfare benefits, passed a battery of antiunion laws, and hiked user fees and sales taxes, while rewarding the rich and big business with massive income tax cuts.

In January 2002, the Liberals used their legislative might to reopen the contracts of public school teachers so as to gut workload and class-size provisions and similarly reopened hospital workers' contracts to abolish restrictions on the contracting-out of work. Since then, almost 10,000 hospital workers have lost their jobs or received notice of their impending layoff.

The Liberals' offensive against the hospital workers threatens the basic rights of workers across Canada. The big-business press and corporate-funded think tanks like the Fraser Institute have long insisted that Medicare, Canada's public universal health care system, is "unsustainable." They are pressing for various "reforms" that would transfer a rising share of

health care costs from the state to working people and greatly expand the opportunities for big business to profit from the provision of health services.

Through the wholesale contracting-out of so-called "non-frontline" medical jobs—housekeeping and maintenance, meal preparation, secretarial services, medical testing and the like—the Campbell government is seeking to finance its tax cuts at the expense of hospital workers and quality patient care. It also is laying the groundwork for privatization of the management and provision of health care services. This would make the medical treatment of working people and their families directly subordinate to the bottom-line of corporate health-providers as in the US.

The depth and breadth of popular hostility to the Campbell Liberal government is palpable. But workers must beware. The leaders of the BC Federation of Labour (BCFL) and the social-democratic politicians of the New Democratic Party (NDP) are working to suppress the opposition movement and corral the hospital workers back to work, just as they did last December with striking ferry and forestry workers.

In response to the wave of wildcat walkouts that erupted Friday in support of the hospital workers, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and then other major unions decided to throw their organizational muscle behind a province-wide day of job action this Monday.

Their aim in placing themselves at the head of the anti-Campbell movement is to ensure that Monday's strike is limited to a single day, that it does not spread beyond the confines of British Columbia, and, above all, that the hospital workers' challenge to Bill 37 does not become the spearhead of a working class political offensive aimed at driving the Campbell government from power and initiating the struggle to build a

genuine socialist party of the working class.

The BCFL leadership's dubbing of Monday's action as a "political protest," rather than a general strike, is not a matter of semantics. The union officialdom claims that by so doing they can avert a conflict with the courts and the Liberal government, since technically their members will not be violating antistrike laws. In truth, by calling the action a "protest," the union leaders want to make clear to big business and the state that they do not intend to challenge the Liberals' "right" to govern. And when Campbell, with the support of the *Vancouver Sun*, BCTV and the entire corporate establishment, refuses to make any substantive concessions and the courts are mobilized to threaten the hospital workers with severe penalties if they do not return to work, the labor bureaucrats will argue that further struggle is futile; the only answer to the government is to await the next election and vote for the NDP, a capitalist party that has been complicit in the assault on the working class.

As for the leaders of the Hospital Employees Union (HEU), they have already signalled that they will order their members to comply with Bill 37 if the current lay-off notices are suspended and the health authorities agree to discuss a cap on contracting-out. Last year, they agreed to wage and workweek provisions similar to those in the Liberal government-dictated contract only to see the tentative agreement they had negotiated rejected by the rank-and-file.

As for the province's largest union, the Industrial Wood and Allied Workers of Canada (IWA), it has worked hand-in-glove with private companies that are bidding on HEU members' jobs, such as Compass, Sodexho and Aramark, signing sweetheart deals under which those hired to replace laid-off HEU members are receiving little more than half their wages.

Time and again, over the past quarter century—during BC's 1983 Operation Solidarity, the struggle against the Harris Tory government in Ontario, and the 1999 Quebec nurses' strike—the union and NDP leaders have shown that they are far more adamantly opposed to a mass working-class challenge to a right-wing big-business government than to the systematic dismantling of the social conquests of the working class.

Their denunciations of Campbell notwithstanding, the union and NDP leaders agree that workers' jobs and basic public and social services must be subordinated to

big business's drive for profit. The NDP, which ruled British Columbia from 1991 to 2001, and throughout enjoyed the steadfast support of the BCFL leadership, paved the way for the coming to power of the current Liberal regime by imposing capitalist austerity, including cuts to public and social services, and by promoting ever-closer integration of the unions into corporate management and the state.

The current BC NDP leader, Carole James, spoke for the entire labor bureaucracy when she responded to the passage of Bill 37 by denouncing the Campbell Liberals for scaring away investors. The government, she said, had brought BC to "the brink of a crisis that threatens to further erode investor confidence in British Columbia and destabilize the BC economy."

If workers have suffered defeat after defeat over the past two decades, it is not because of the intrinsic strength of capital, or even less because of any broad popular support for its reactionary program, but because the struggles of the working class have been animated by the false perspective that the needs of working people can be reconciled with the profit system. In opposition to the principle of market domination put forward by the ruling class in its constant efforts to extract an ever-larger share of society's wealth, workers must put forward a progressive alternative—a society of a higher type, where the immense resources made available by modern technology will be put to the service of all, by bringing the banks, utilities and large resource and manufacturing companies under public and democratic control.

To prosecute this struggle, workers must build their own political party in concert with their class brothers and sisters in the rest of Canada, the United States and internationally, and dedicated to the goal of social equality. It is for this perspective that the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party fight.



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