

# British Columbia: Rank-and-file outrage at betrayal of hospital workers' struggle

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The British Columbia Federation of Labour (BCFL) and the Hospital Employees Union (HEU) are facing a torrent of rank-and-file criticism for their short-circuiting of a strike by more than forty thousand hospital workers that threatened to become the spearhead of a working class challenge to the right-wing provincial Liberal government of Gordon Campbell.

The hospital workers' defiance of the Liberals' strikebreaking legislation, Bill 37, galvanized workers across the province, prompting wildcat strikes by both public sector and forestry industry workers. Fearing they were losing control of the rank and file, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), followed shortly thereafter by the Canadian Auto Workers, BC Teachers' Federation and other unions, called a province-wide "day of protest" for Monday, May 3.

Meanwhile, behind the scenes, the union officialdom and their allies in the New Democratic Party were pleading with the Liberals to make some minor adjustments to Bill 37, so they could more readily justify their capitulation. "Our first goal," declared BCFL spokesperson Jessie Uppal, "is to get a deal."

Late on the evening of May 2, BCFL and HEU leaders announced they had reached an agreement with the Liberal government—an agreement that enshrines a 15 percent pay cut and massive job losses. They then immediately ordered the tens of thousands of workers poised to join the hospital workers on the streets in the coming hours to "stand down."

Nonetheless, thousands of workers did stay off the job for part or all of the following day, many quite consciously as an act of defiance directed at the union leadership as much as at the Liberal government. Union officials found themselves confronted, and sometimes

literally encircled, by members angered by the onerous terms imposed on the hospital workers, but also by the sabotage of the broader struggle against the hated Liberal regimes. Among the sites picketed was the suburban Vancouver headquarters of the HEU.

To try to pacify their members, CUPE, the national union with which the HEU is affiliated, hosted a discussion forum on the settlement on its website. In posting after posting, workers denounced the agreement as a "betrayal" and a "sellout." Some called for the resignation of HEU negotiator Chris Allutt and other union officials. Typical was the following comment: "I'm disappointed that the general day of protest never happened. All this grand talk fizzled out to squeaming and bowing to the government."

The union leaders have justified their betrayal by claiming that the agreement they negotiated with the Campbell Liberal government "limits the damage." They point to the fact that unlike Bill 37 the May 2 accord places a limit of 600 full-time hospital positions that can be contracted out over the next two years.

This is truly a case of bolting the barn door after the horse has bolted. Since the Liberals reopened the hospital workers' contract in January 2002 so as to gut prohibitions on the contracting out of work, almost ten thousand HEU members have lost their jobs or received notice of their impending layoff. The agreement endorsed by the BCFL and HEU leaders stipulates that the "cap" on contracting out doesn't apply either to those who have already had their jobs contracted-out or to the more than 2,500 workers who received layoff notices since negotiations began earlier this year.

The union leaders are also trumpeting the fact that the Liberals have agreed not to make the 15 percent wage cut retroactive to April 1—under the agreement negotiated by the BCFL and HEU leaders it took effect

May 3; the government's concession of an additional \$25 million for severance pay, which is equal to a few thousand dollars per job eliminated; and the government's promise to forgo any penalties against the unions and individual workers for having defied Bill 37's stipulation that they immediately terminate the strike.

The events in BC have once again demonstrated that the union officialdom and the social-democratic politicians of the New Democratic Party fear far more the mobilization of the working class than they do the gutting of health care, other basic public services and the most elementary trade union rights.

Since coming to power in the spring of 2001, the Liberals have slashed funding for public and social services, cut 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.

This class war agenda has provoked heated and increasingly widespread opposition. Sections of the middle class who, in anger at the previous NDP government's provision of both deteriorating public services and increased levels of taxation, had bought into the Liberals' tax-cutting agenda, are now questioning the Liberals' privatization and deregulation program. Even the notoriously right-wing *National Post* had to concede that there was mass public support for the hospital workers—no matter that they were defying the “law” and that the strike, despite their best efforts, was causing hardship to patients and their families. “Public sentiment,” wrote *Post* columnist Brian Hutchinson, “rested with the hospital workers.”

For the union and NDP leadership it was precisely the potential that the hospital workers struggle might go beyond the bounds of a trade union collective-bargaining dispute and become the spearhead of a mass working class political struggle that made it so urgent that it be suppressed. With wildcat walkouts erupting across the provinces and teachers and others suggesting they might stay out longer than the prescribed 24 hours the union leaders feared they would find it difficult to restrict job action in support of the hospital workers to just May 3. Even greater was their fear of the political implications of the hospital workers' continued defiance of Bill 37, the courts and the government. Objectively, the hospital workers' struggle to defend

their jobs and working conditions and oppose the dismantling of Medicare was a challenge to the continued existence of the Campbell government.

Provincial 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.”

Time and again over the past quarter century, the unions and NDP have served to contain and smother militant working class struggles. Last week's events are a virtual replay of the unions' role in the 1997 Ontario teachers' and 1999 Quebec nurses' strikes.

The anger among workers in BC toward the union leadership is palpable. But it must be reinforced with an alternative political strategy—the independent political mobilization of the working class, through the building of a new party based on a socialist and internationalist program.

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 oppose 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.



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