

British Columbia teachers defy anti-strike law, court rulings

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Forty-two thousand British Columbia elementary and secondary school teachers are mounting an “illegal” strike in defiance of a provincial labour relations board “cease-and-desist” order, a BC Supreme Court contempt of court ruling, and a series of repressive laws enacted by BC’s Liberal government.

The latest of these laws, Bill 12, was rammed through the provincial legislature last Friday. It imposes a new contract on teachers that freezes their wage for two years (from June 30, 2004 to June 30, 2006) and re-imposes the increases in teacher workload and class sizes that the Liberals first imposed in January 2002 under Bill 28.

The Liberals and the corporate media have denounced the public school teachers for breaking the law and holding 600,000 school children “hostage.” Opinion polls, however, show that most working people recognize that it is the government and its big business masters who threaten public education. According to one poll, 55 percent of British Columbians supported teachers taking strike action, while just 19 percent said they were more supportive of the government than the teachers.

First elected in 2001, the Campbell Liberal government has modeled itself after the 1995-2001 Ontario Conservative regime of Mike Harris. It has slashed public and social services, promoted the contracting out of hospital and other public sector jobs, passed a battery of anti-worker legislation, and victimized welfare recipients, while rewarding the rich and big business with repeated rounds of tax cuts.

Provincial cuts to education have resulted in the layoff of close to 2,000 teachers since 2002, the closure of more than one hundred neighbourhood schools, cuts in the number of librarians, specialist teachers and counselors, and a growing shortage of classroom materials.

The teachers’ militancy and the broad public support for their struggle notwithstanding, it would be a serious mistake to believe that the BC teachers can prevail without the adoption of a radically new political strategy. Teachers and their supporters across Canada must fight to make the BC strike the catalyst for the independent industrial and political mobilization of the working class against the Campbell Liberal government and for the building of a genuine political party of the working class that opposes the subordination of social needs to the imperatives of the capitalist market. The fight for such a program will require a rebellion against those who posture as the leadership of the working class—the BC Federation of Labour (BCFL) and Canadian Labour Congress bureaucracies

and the social-democratic politicians of the New Democratic Party (NDP).

In BC, as elsewhere in Canada and around the world, the past quarter century has been punctuated by bitter class struggles. But these struggles invariably have been suppressed and betrayed by the trade unions and social-democratic parties because these nationally-rooted organizations accept the inviolability of the existing capitalist social order. Under conditions where, as a result of the development of globalized production, capital systematically shifts production to wherever profits are highest, the unions and social democrats have evolved from placing pressure on the employers within the national labor market to pressuring workers to accept speed-up, wage cuts and corporate tax cuts so as to secure investment.

Three critical experiences of BC workers exemplify the role of the union bureaucracy and the NDP:

* In 1983, the union bureaucracy strangled a mass movement toward a province-wide general strike against a battery of Social Credit laws that introduced the Reagan-Thatcher model to Canada’s West Coast. As for the NDP, its then leader Dave Barrett deplored the strike movement as illegal and a threat to “democracy” at least as big as the government’s assault on democratic and worker rights.

* The 1991-2001 NDP government in BC paved the way for the coming to power of the Campbell Liberals, by accommodating itself ever-more completely to the demands of big business. Under Mike Harcourt, Glen Clark, and finally Ujjal Dosanjh (now a federal Liberal cabinet minister), the NDP imposed budget and public-sector wage austerity, used legislation to break strikes, imposed new restrictions on teachers’ right to strike, and embraced workfare and the “law and order” rhetoric of the right.

* Workers in BC have repeatedly come forward to challenge the Campbell Liberal government, only to have the unions and NDP leaders isolate strikes and impose concessions-laden agreements on the rank-and-file. Especially noteworthy were the December 2003 ferry workers’ and May 2004 hospital workers’ strikes. In both cases, workers struck in defiance of antiunion laws and their militant action threatened to become the catalyst for a province-wide general strike, since large numbers of workers rightly saw them as challenging the hated Campbell Liberal government.

The BCFL and NDP leaders professed support for the striking ferry and hospital workers, but behind the scenes they worked with the government to find a formula to declare the strikes ended. (See

“British Columbia: Rank-and-file outrage at betrayal of hospital workers’ struggle” and “British Columbia: Unions suppress ferry and forest strikes”) Thus on the eve of a province-wide day of action in support of the hospital workers, the BCFL and Hospital Employees Union (HEU) leaders announced that they had reached an agreement with the government and ordered an immediate return to work. This agreement enshrined a 15 percent pay cut and massive job losses.

The union bureaucrats and social democrats are intent on “leading” teachers to a similar “victory.” While the government has clearly provoked an all-out confrontation with the teachers—imposing by legislative fiat a two-year wage freeze under conditions where the province is enjoying a \$2 billion budget surplus and has just announced a new round of corporate tax cuts—BC Federation of Labour President Jim Sinclair continues to plead with the Liberals to come to the table. “Premier Campbell needs to hear from us our commitment to a negotiated settlement,” Sinclair told the press conference the federation convened last Wednesday to give its response to the tabling of Bill 12 in the BC legislature.

While at present there are no formal negotiations between the BC Teachers’ Federation and the government, Sinclair and other top BCFL leaders did meet with Labour Minister Mike de Jong behind closed doors Thursday. And BCTF President Jinny Sims responded to Sunday’s BC Supreme Court ruling that the union was in contempt of court by immediately appealing to de Jong for talks. Earlier Sims had said that the BCTF is ready to return to bargaining without conditions—i.e. without the government even pledging to rescind Bill 12.

Of especial significance is the labour bureaucracy’s dubbing of the strike as a “political protest.” This has become the preferred term of union leaders across the country when they have been compelled by rank-and-file pressure to launch strikes that transcend traditional collective bargaining and objectively constitute a political challenge to governments intent on radically restructuring class relations in favor of big business.

By calling the teachers’ 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, that they are mounting a protest, not a struggle against the government. And when Campbell, with the support of the corporate media and big business as whole, uses the courts to threaten the teachers with severe legal penalties if they do not return to work, the labor bureaucrats will argue that further struggle is futile; the only answer is to await the chance to vote an NDP government in office in 2009.

If BC Supreme Court Justice Nancy Brown, after ruling that the BCTF and teachers were in contempt of court for having struck in defiance of the government’s 2001 law proclaiming education an essential service and the labour relations board cease-and-desist order, decided to defer imposing penalties till next Thursday, it was because she calculates that it would be less politically radicalizing if the courts and government can—just as they have done in the past—delegate responsibility for terminating the teachers’ struggle to the unions and NDP.

While working people have been radicalized by the ever-

widening big business assault on job, wages and public and social services, the union and NDP leaders have responded by moving ever-further to the right.

During last spring’s provincial election campaign NDP leader Carole James sought to win big business’ favor by promising that an NDP government would never go into deficit, attacking all previous BC NDP governments for being too pro-labor, and criticizing the Campbell Liberals for undermining investor confidence by shunning consultation with the unions.

In her maiden speech in the legislature last month, James offered to work with the class-war Campbell regime. “When the government shows a readiness to work in partnership for the common good,” declared James, “we will join in that pursuit. We cannot afford to allow the shutting of ears and minds to new ideas simply because they were put forward by old adversaries. ...”

“As I have said before, there are no enemies in BC. We will all sink or swim together. And despite our differences, we must take up our challenges with shared purpose and resolve.”

No less than Campbell, BCTV and the *Vancouver Sun*, the NDP and BCFL leaders fear a radical upsurge of the working class.

The Socialist Equality Party urges workers in BC and across Canada to rally to the support of the BC teachers. Any attempt to impose fines or other sanctions against teachers should be countered by a general strike involving all sections of the working class. Above all, the working class must constitute itself as an independent political force advancing its own solution to the social crisis. The demand of big business and the entire political establishment—from Stephen Harper’s Conservatives to the NDP—that social needs must be subordinated to the profit interests of the few must be rejected, and a socialist program for radically reorganizing economic life so as to meet the needs of the vast majority and promote social equality championed.



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