

BC teachers strike shakes Campbell Liberal government

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Forty-two thousand British Columbia elementary and secondary school teachers are continuing to mount a province-wide strike in defiance of antiunion laws, a provincial labour relations board cease-and-desist order, and a BC Supreme Court contempt-of-court ruling.

Justice Nancy Brown is slated to rule this morning on what penalties will be imposed on the BC Teachers' Federation, its officers and possibly individual teachers for their failure to abide by her order for an immediate end to the strike. The BC Public School Employers Association, which functions as a tool of the right-wing provincial Liberal government, is urging the judge to impose massive fines—fines greater than the C\$150,000 a day penalty levied on the Hospital Employees Union in 2004 when its members struck in defiance of a contempt of court ruling.

BC's public school teachers walked out last Friday, just hours after the Liberal government of Gordon Campbell rammed through a bill that freezes teachers' salaries for two years and re-imposes the increases in class sizes and teachers' workloads that the government dictated in 2002.

To the consternation of the government, big business, and the corporate-controlled media, their attempts to blackguard the teachers for holding 600,000 children "hostage," schooling them in "law-breaking" and promoting anarchy have failed to impress the public. Indeed, the media has been forced to admit that there is strong popular support for the teachers, despite the inconvenience the strike is causing for many working parents. Not only do many recognize that the teachers are fighting to defend quality public education, against a government that has slashed school budgets and forced more students on teachers while rewarding big business and the well-to-do with tax cuts. There are

many workers who perceive the teachers' strike as the potential catalyst for a broader movement that will challenge the entire agenda of the hated Campbell regime.

First elected in 2001, the Campbell Liberals have modeled themselves on the former Ontario Tory government of Mike Harris. The Campbell government has slashed public and social services, promoted contracting-out and privatization, victimized welfare recipients, gutted environmental and labour standards (including protections for young workers), passed a battery of anti-union laws, and through tax cuts further redistributed wealth to the benefit of the privileged.

Thousands of teachers and their supporters joined some 16 often boisterous rallies in support of the teachers Tuesday evening. At the 4,000-strong Vancouver rally, speeches by top union official were repeatedly interrupted by audience chants of "general strike."

While the likes of BC Government and Service Employees Union President George Heyman and Canadian Union of Public Employees BC President Barry O'Neill pledged their full support for the teachers—just as they did for the ferry workers and hospital workers whose strikes they cruelly betrayed in 2003 and 2004—the only speaker to acknowledge the chants was BC Federation of Labour (BCFL) President Gordon Sinclair. "We hear you," said Sinclair. Then in his very next breath, the BCFL president revealed his dread of such action, saying he hoped it wouldn't come to that.

The previous day, an emergency meeting of the BCFL leadership had issued a plea to Campbell for negotiations—no matter that the government clearly provoked a confrontation with the teachers with the aim of escalating its class war assault on public and social

services and workers' rights. "We met with the government last week and tried to find a solution," said Sinclair at the BCFL meeting's conclusion. "I remain hopeful that the government recognizes negotiation is the only way to end this dispute."

The BCFL executive's call was echoed by the leader of the BC New Democratic Party (NDP), Carole James. In a press release Tuesday, the social-democratic politician called on Campbell to "provide leadership." "What is needed right now from the Premier is a personal commitment to sit down and talk directly with teachers."

Over the past year, James has repeatedly offered to work with the Liberal government, attacked the 1991-2001 BC NDP government (which opened the door for the coming to power of the Liberals by accommodating itself ever more completely to the demands of big business) from the right, and accused Campbell of scaring away investors by needlessly provoking strikes.

The Campbell Liberal government clearly has been shaken by the groundswell of popular support for the teachers. But it remains adamant that there will be no substantive changes to the contract it has legislated, holding out the prospect of teacher participation in a government-designed roundtable on the future of education once the strike is terminated.

Education Minister Shirley Bond announced Wednesday that the government will offer "protection" to any teachers who try to return to work. It is possible that the government with the help of the corporate media is planning to stage some type of provocation in an attempt to portray the teachers as violent.

But the principal strategy of the government and of big business is to rely on the union officialdom and the NDP to strangle the strike, as they have done repeatedly in BC and across Canada whenever militant struggles have erupted.

The labor bureaucrats with their pleas for negotiations and their insistence that the strike is a "political protest—not a political struggle—have made clear that they uphold the "legitimacy" of the Campbell government and are determined to prevent the teachers' strike from becoming the spearhead of an independent political movement of the working class.

Teachers and their supporters in BC and across Canada must make no mistake. The BC teachers' strike

has yet again demonstrated that, notwithstanding the propaganda of the media and political establishment, there is only a narrow constituency that supports big business's socially regressive agenda of subordinating all social needs to the imperatives of the capitalist market. But if the teachers' strike is not to be sabotaged—as the no less powerful strike of Ontario teachers was in 1997—a new political strategy must be adopted in opposition to the pro-capitalist unions and the NDP. Militant strike action in support of the teachers, across BC and elsewhere in Canada, must be combined with the fight for the building of a new mass party of the working class that will champion a radical reorganization of economic life so that social needs can be placed before the profits interests of the few.



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