

British Columbia teachers strike poses need for a working-class political offensive

Of Socialist Equality Party (Canada)

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The WSWS encourages readers to download the following statement and distribute it at the mass rally to be held in Victoria, British Columbia, today in support of striking teachers and at picket lines and strike-support rallies across the province.

Today's walkout in the Greater Victoria region and march on the provincial legislature attest to the mass popular support that exists for British Columbia's 40,000 striking public school teachers and their principled and courageous defiance of anti-strike legislation and court rulings.

The provincial Liberal government of Gordon Campbell and the corporate media have sought to whip up public opposition to the teachers by accusing them of taking 600,000 school children hostage, creating havoc for working parents, and thwarting the "democratic will" of the legislature. Masses of working people recognize, however, that it is the Liberals who threaten essential public services and basic democratic rights and rightly view the teachers' strike as a means of challenging a government that for four-and-a-half long years has ruthlessly imposed the dictates of big business.

But if today's action demonstrates the potential for a working-class counteroffensive against the assault on public and social services, jobs, worker-rights and environmental regulations, it also no less decisively points to the urgency of teachers and their supporters wresting the strike from the control of the leaders of the British Columbia Federation of Labour (BCFL) and their social-democratic politician allies in the New Democratic Party.

Make no mistake: the BCFL has authorized today's limited action—which leaves the province's economic and financial hub, Vancouver, untouched—not with the intention of developing a working-class industrial and political offensive against the Liberal government. Rather the union bureaucrats have called it in the hope that it will give them the credibility before the rank and file they calculate that they need to swiftly and ruthlessly close down the teachers' struggle; just as they terminated the 2003 ferry-worker and 2004 hospital worker strikes and the 1983 Operation Solidarity strike when they threatened to become catalysts for a mass working-class upsurge.

All weekend long, BCFL President Jim Sinclair pleaded with

the Liberals to agree to talks, saying that if they did, today's protest would be scuttled and the teachers corralled back to work. A solemn Sinclair complained Saturday that he had yet to hear from the government, then expressed his trepidation over the BCFL having to carry out even its threat of a regionally-circumscribed, one-day strike: "This is a very serious, sobering moment for the labour movement. None of us are excited or ecstatic about what's happening here."

The NDP, for its part, actually welcomed last Thursday's ruling of BC Supreme Court Judge Brenda Brown which, by seizing the BC Teachers' Federation assets, robs teachers of their picket pay and leaves the union and teachers open to severe reprisals in the future. Declared NDP education critic John Horgan. "I'm hopeful that [Labour Minister] Mike De Jong will seize this opportunity. There is an opportunity to reach out to, and I think they'd get a positive response from, the union leadership."

Above all the NDP and union leaders have been anxious to reassure British Columbia's and Canada's corporate elite that they are not challenging the Campbell government's legitimacy—i.e., its right to govern. By describing the strike as "political protest," they have made explicit their intention to surrender before the government.

Rightly wary of the union and NDP leaders, many workers are pressing from below for militant strike action, including a general strike. Such action is entirely welcome, but what must be recognized above all is that the pivotal issue facing teachers and the working class is the need for a new political perspective. If workers in BC and across Canada have suffered one defeat after another over the past two decades, it has not been from a lack of militant strike struggles, but because these struggles have been confined within the straitjacket of collective bargaining and parliamentary protest. That is to say they have been predicated on an acceptance of the existing capitalist socio-economic order which systematically subordinates basic social needs to the profits of big business.

In fighting to defend their working conditions and public education, teachers are challenging not just the policy of the Campbell Liberal government, but the class strategy of the entire Canadian bourgeoisie and international capital.

For the past two decades, every government in Canada,

whether federal or provincial, Liberal, Conservative, NDP, Parti Quebecois, or Social Credit, has slashed public and social services and attacked workers rights. The 1991-2001 BC NDP government 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 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.

While the massive social spending cuts of the mid-1990s were initially publicly justified in the name of fighting the deficit, governments soon began implementing massive tax cuts for big business and the well-to-do, so as to ensure that the state lacks the means to repair the gaping holes in the social safety net. Just before the 2000 federal election, the Martin-Chretien Liberal government unveiled a five-year \$100 billion tax-cutting program, that even the neo-conservative National Post hailed as a “(Canadian) Alliance budget.” Last summer, the Supreme Court seized on the crisis the big business agenda has created in health care to open the floodgates to a two-tier health care system in which for-profit health care will become the norm and the rich will be able to afford the best health care money can buy, while working people are forced to rely on a dilapidated public system.

The drive of big business and its political agents to dismantle public and social services and systematically eliminate all restraints on capital has resulted in growing social inequality, poverty, and economic insecurity and an endless series of social catastrophes from the Walkerton water-tragedy in Ontario to the US government's abandonment of the victims of Hurricane Katrina.

But each concession to capital only produces further demands, as state and companies compete in driving down social conditions. In the recent German elections voters decisively rejected the calls of the political establishment for massive cuts to social programs and increased job “flexibility” so as to render conditions in Germany, more like those in Britain and the US. Despite this two major German parties—the right-wing CDU and the social-democratic SPD—joined forces last week in a Grand Coalition so as to ensure that these regressive changes will be implemented.

The never-ending assault on public and social services is justified on the grounds that there is no money.” This is a lie. The past quarter-century has witnessed a technological revolution that has lead to a phenomenal increase in the productivity of labour. But under capitalism, this new technology has been used only to intensify the assault on the working class, through the slashing of jobs and the systematic transfer of production to wherever the most profits can be squeezed from workers.

As nationally-based organizations that accept the inviolability of the capitalist social order, the unions and NDP have proved

powerless before, and complicit in, the ever-widening big business assault on the working class. Whereas once they were willing to pressure capital for limited reforms within the framework of a nationally-regulated capitalist economy, now they demand that workers make concessions to the corporations to secure investments. In line with this orientation, they assist the corporations in employing global production as an arm against the working class, by calling on workers to oppose not the corporations on the basis of an international working-class strategy, but workers in other countries.

Thus BC NDP leader Carole James in her maiden speech to the BC Legislature last month offered to work hand-in-hand with the Campbell government and declared that workers and big business are partners: “As I have said before, there are no enemies in BC. We will all sink or swim together.”

Workers must consciously repudiate the pro-capitalist perspective of the NDP and trade union leaders. The means exist to provide quality public education, jobs and public services for all. But for these goals to be realized the economy must be radically restructured so as to make the fulfillment of social need, not the profit of a few, the animating principle.

The Socialist Equality Party urges teachers and their supporters to make explicit the political character of their struggle by transforming the strike into the spearhead of an independent political mobilization of the working class. This means coupling province-wide industrial action and demands for the repeal of Bill 12 and the battery of anti-union laws passed by the Campbell Liberal government, with the fight to build a new mass political party of the working class committed to a socialist program and the forging of the international unity of the working class.

We urge all teachers and their supporters in BC and across Canada to discuss these policies, read the *World Socialist Web Site*, and write into the WSWS to become active in the fight for a socialist political perspective.



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