As support, walkouts grow

Union and NDP leaders conspire to close down British Columbia teachers strike

Our correspondent
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Hundreds of thousands of workers in British Columbia are poised to join walkouts in the coming days in support of the province's 40,000 public school teachers and the challenge that they are mounting to a battery of antiunion laws and the BC Liberal government's agenda of slashing public and social services.

On Monday, public transit, mail delivery and other government services in the provincial capital, Victoria, and the Vancouver Island region were disrupted when thousands of workers walked off the job in response to a call from the BC Federation of Labour. The highlight of the "day of action" was a rally of more than twenty thousand teachers, trade unionists, and parents and their children outside the BC legislature.

Meanwhile, Gordon Campbell's Liberal government is ratcheting up its efforts to use the powers of the state to force an end to the strike. As the protest was unfolding in Victoria, the government announced that it had appointed a special prosecutor to examine whether criminal contempt proceedings should be initiated against the union and teachers.

On Oct. 9 BC Supreme Court Justice Brenda Brown ruled the teachers' strike illegal. Then last Thursday she effectively seized control of the finances of the BC Teachers Federation to rob teachers of their $50 per day in picket pay. Were she to rule that the strike constituted criminal contempt, she would have the power to jail union leaders and fine individual teachers.

The government's increasingly draconian stance against the teachers is born of its fear that the strike could become the catalyst for a working-class counter-offensive. Support for the teachers is swelling because masses of working people recognize that in fighting for caps on class sizes and more support for children with various learning challenges, the teachers are fighting to defend public education. Also many rightly see the teachers' action as a means of striking back against a government that during four-and-a-half years in office has ruthlessly imposed the dictates of big business by slashing social spending, promoting the contracting out of hospital and other public service jobs, gutting labour standards and environmental regulations, and redistributing wealth to the most privileged through cuts in corporate taxes and the taxes levied on high-income earners.

At a press conference Sunday, BC business leaders accused the teachers and their supporters of fomenting chaos and anarchy and undermining the province's economy. While charging the teachers and their supporters with flouting democracy, the message of business leaders was that if workers continued to resist Gordon Campbell's Liberal government the corporate elite would resort to an investment strike, as they did during much of the 1990s, in a successful campaign to push the then New Democratic Party (NDP) government to abandon its timid reformist program and impose capitalist austerity.

Exclaimed Kevin Evans of the Coalition of BC Business, "There's no question this is harkening back to some of the bad old days of British Columbia where instability ruled." Evans went on to voice concern that if the strike was not broken it "may look small in comparison" with "what we are in for in the spring" when many other public sector contracts expire.

Precisely because the teachers' strike has shaken the political and corporate establishment and stoked worker-militancy and self-confidence, the trade union

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officialdom and the social democratic politicians of the NDP are determined to smother it.

While on several occasions a substantial section of Monday's 20,000-strong rally took up the chant "general strike, general strike," the one overriding message of the union leaders addressing the crowd was that if the government would only agree to talks, they would shut the strike down.

"I say to Mr. Campbell on behalf of British Columbians: Get off the high horse and get down to the table and start talking," declared BCFL President Jim Sinclair.

"All we want from Gordon Campbell and his representatives," affirmed BCTF President Jinny Sims, "is a (bargaining) table."

Subsequently, Sims revealed to the press that the union leaders and government are already involved in backroom negotiations on a deal that would leave all the teachers' key demands unmet—the rescinding of a two-year wage freeze, the restoration of the legal right to strike, and the right to bargain over such issues as class sizes—leave teachers potentially open to savage reprisals, and allow the Campbell Liberal government to remain in office to pursue its class war agenda.

Sims told the *Vancouver Sun*, "We've gone so far in getting the government to the table that now they have to make a move."

If the labour bureaucrats have sanctioned one-day walkouts, it is with hopes of boosting their credibility with the rank-and-file so as to better to corral the teachers back to work and snuff out the challenge to the authority of the Liberal government.

This was starkly revealed in comments made by BC NDP leader Carole James to reporters during Monday's rally. Two weeks ago James urged teachers to abide by the law and remain on the job. But she and the NDP have since postured as supporters of the teachers, while claiming that the teachers' struggle to defend public education can be reconciled with the government's big business agenda if the two sides would just talk.

James told the *Vancouver Sun* Monday: "The government should sit down with the teachers and work out a deal" before the strike mushrooms. "I don't want to see a general strike. I don't want to see people not to returning to work. It's the premier who has to show some leadership and step up to the plate."

Asked by the *Sun* why she was not telling the teachers to obey the law, James said, "People should follow the law. I've made that statement. I've made that statement publicly. People accept consequences when they don't follow the law. Teachers know that ..."

If the teachers' militant strike is not to be strangled by the labour and NDP leaders as were the 2003 ferry workers' and 2004 hospital workers' strikes, rank and file workers must seize control of the strike and impart to it a new and radically different strategy. Above all what must be recognized is that workers face a political struggle not only against the Campbell government, but against the entire political and economic elite. The working class must constitute itself as an independent political force so that it can fight for a program to reorganize society and thereby make social need, not the profits of the few, the animating principle of economic life. Militant industrial action in support of the teachers must be coupled with the struggle to build a new mass workers' party.

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