

British Columbia teachers strike in grave danger

Keith Jones
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The militant two-week strike that 40,000 British Columbia teachers have mounted against a government-imposed contract, in defiance of a battery of antiunion laws and in defence of public education, is in grave danger.

Since Monday, tens of thousands of trade unionists and parents of school children have participated in rotating, regional “days of action” in support of the teachers. While the sympathy strikes have been spearheaded by public sector workers and striking workers at the telecommunications giant Telus, other private sector workers, including miners and forestry and utility workers, have joined the walkouts.

The strong support for the regional days of action exemplifies the breadth of support for the teachers and the depth of working-class hostility toward the provincial Liberal government of Gordon Campbell, which in its four-and-half years in office has slashed public and social services, gutted labour and environmental standards and rewarded business and the well-to-do with huge tax cuts. Even the corporate media has been forced to concede that opinion polls have repeatedly shown the majority of the public supports the teachers in their fight with the government.

It is precisely because the strike has become a challenge to the legitimacy of the Campbell Liberal government that the union bureaucracy and the social democratic politicians of the New Democratic Party (NDP) are determined to shut it down, just as they sabotaged last year’s hospital workers’ strike and the 2003 ferry workers’ strike. Speaking at a press conference Thursday, BC Teachers Federation (BCTF) president Jinny Sims conceded that in recent days the leadership of the teachers union has made “a huge compromise” to reach an agreement with the government. Said Simms, “In order to break this impasse, because the government seems very entrenched, we have made considerable moves.”

Make no mistake, the teachers strike, notwithstanding its militancy, will be lost unless rank-and-file teachers and their supporters seize control of the strike from the union and NDP leaders and make it the spearhead of a working class

political offensive aimed at mobilizing the working class in BC and across Canada against the assault on public services, jobs and workers’ rights. Such an offensive would entail militant industrial action, including a general strike, but most importantly, the launching of the struggle to build a genuine workers party, which would answer the never-ending demands of big business and their political hirelings for further cuts and concessions to bolster “global competitiveness” by advancing a program to radically reorganize the economy so as to make social needs, not the profits of a few, its animating principle.

If teachers find themselves confronting the government, the courts, and the unanimous hostility of the business establishment, it is because in they are challenging not only the policy of the current Campbell Liberal government but the class strategy of the entire Canadian bourgeoisie and international capital.

The NDP, which paved the way for the coming to power of the Campbell Liberals by imposing capitalist austerity during the decade they ruled British Columbia (1991-2001), has from the beginning made no secret of its opposition to the teachers’ strike. BC NDP leader Carole James urged teachers not to strike in defiance of Liberal antiunion laws. When BC Supreme Court Justice Brenda Brown seized control of the BCTF’s finances, so as to prevent the union from using its resources to support the strike and rob teachers of their picket pay, the NDP welcomed the judge’s ruling, saying it opened the way to a negotiated settlement. Repeatedly the NDP has cited the agreement the Liberals struck with the leadership of the Hospital Employees Union to end a 2004 strike in defiance of Liberal antiunion laws as a model for the teachers. That agreement slashed the wages of 40,000 hospital workers by 15 percent and enshrined massive job losses.

The BC Federation of Labour, meanwhile, has sanctioned limited support action for the teachers, organized in such a way as to prevent as long as possible any labor disruption in the Vancouver region, the province’s economic and financial center. Like the NDP, the BCFL leaders have made

clear that the prospect of a general strike terrifies them—not only because it would tarnish the “investor-friendly” image of BC they have worked with business and government to promote, but because they fear losing control of the mounting opposition to the government.

From the standpoint of the BCFL leaders, the days of action are a ploy aimed at refurbishing their tattered credentials as workers’ leaders, so that they will have more credibility when they argue for the scuttling of the strike.

Throughout the strike, the BCFL has made the call for unconditional talks with the Campbell government—a government that has pursued an unabashed class war program—its one and only demand. The BCFL has not even demanded the repeal of Bill 12, the law the Liberals rammed through the legislature Oct. 7 that imposes a regressive contract on the teachers, let alone the laws the Liberals adopted in 2001 and 2002 that stripped teachers of the right to strike, tore up class-size limits and otherwise increased their workload.

The Liberals calculated that with the backing of the media and the courts they would be able to isolate the teachers and browbeat them back to work. Although they kept behind-the-scenes channels with the BCFL leadership open, they publicly proclaimed that they would not hold any talks with the BCTF till the teachers were back at work.

As the strike lengthened, this stance came to be increasingly criticized from within the BC establishment, which like the government was shocked and dismayed by the extent of the support for the teachers. The usually rabidly antiunion *Vancouver Sun*, for example, urged the government to defuse and not needlessly prolong the conflict, by accepting the unions’ plea for talks. And on Tuesday, Justice Brown delayed taking further action against the union, for fear it might result in an escalation of job action and, in any event, undermine the pretense that the courts stand above politics and classes by further identifying them with the government’s campaign against the teachers. Better, or so goes the thinking in much of the establishment, to let the unions and NDP assume responsibility for ending the strike.

On Wednesday, Labour Minister Mike de Jong admitted what BCTF officials had already revealed, that the government had named labour mediator Vince Ready as a “facilitator” to broker a deal between the unions and government to end the strike. With decades of experience working out deals between corporate Canada, the BC government and the union bureaucracy, Ready is the consummate “political fixer” in BC.

Less than 24 hours later, Ready publicly announced an impasse. By no means should this be taken to mean that talks have irrevocably broken down. Ready’s statement is

clearly aimed at putting additional pressure on the unions and NDP leaders to lean on the BCTF leadership to make further concessions beyond the huge ones that Sims already concedes have been made.

Any such deal will clearly represent a major betrayal, leaving intact the two-year wage freeze, the increased class sizes imposed in 2002 and the antiunion laws, with at best a promise to discuss class sizes and such issues at a provincial round-table with other “stake-holders” in the future. Last but not least, such a deal would be aimed at putting an end to the working class upsurge against the Campbell Liberal government, thereby allowing it to regroup and initiate still further attacks.

Justice Brown meanwhile has convened a court hearing for this morning at which there is the threat she will declare the union in criminal contempt. Such a ruling would allow her not only to threaten the BCTF with massive fines, but order union leaders jailed and individual teachers fined or even arrested.

If the teachers’ strike is not to end in a further bitter reversal for the working class, rank and file workers must go into action immediately to seize the leadership of the strike and transform it into an industrial and political mobilization of the entire working class against the Liberal government and for the building of a new, mass socialist party.

See Also:

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