

BC teachers vote to end strike

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British Columbia's 40,000 public elementary and secondary school teachers voted last weekend to accept the recommendations of a mediator and end their two-week-long illegal strike.

Seventy-seven percent of the teachers voted, in accordance with the recommendation of the BC Teachers' Federation executive, to accept the mediator's proposals. Most, however, did so with little enthusiasm.

Close to 7,000 other teachers voted to continue the strike despite a series of court rulings that robbed teachers of their strike pay and the threat—reiterated by BC Supreme Court Justice Brenda Brown on Friday—that strike leaders and even individual teachers could be found in criminal contempt of court if the strike continued.

BCTF President Jinny Sims conceded that the agreement falls far short of teachers' demands. Teachers' rights to strike and to bargain collectively over such issues as class sizes and class composition, rights the Liberals abolished under antiunion laws adopted in 2001 and 2002, have not been restored. The government has promised to amend the Schools Act to establish maximum class sizes for Grades 4 through 12, but these limits will be fixed at the government's discretion, and in all likelihood, the BCTF will have no means of grieving or otherwise forcing school boards to adhere to them.

Teachers' wages will be frozen for two years, from June 2004 to July 2006, just as the Liberals decreed under the legislation they rushed through the legislature earlier this month to impose a new contract on the teachers, Bill 12.

Under the mediator's proposal some C\$100 million—significantly less, as Premier Gordon Campbell was quick to point out, than the C\$150 million the government saved by not having to pay teachers during the strike—will be re-allocated to address various

teachers' concerns. Forty million dollars will be allotted to harmonizing teachers' salaries across the province, and the government will make a one-time payment of the same size to the teachers' long-term disability fund. The government has also accepted the mediator's recommendation that it give C\$20 million more to school boards to reduce class sizes and provide support for students with special needs.

Thus far, the government has not said whether it will adhere to a request from the BC School Trustees Association that local school boards be allowed to keep any monies saved during the strike over and above the money needed to fund the settlement with the teachers, an estimated C\$45 million.

When mediator Vince Ready first released his report, the BCTF leadership demanded written guarantees from the government as to how it would address the class-size issue and the lack of support for students with special needs. But ultimately the BCTF executive caved in to pressure from the BC Federation of Labour (BCFL) and their allies in the social-democratic New Democratic Party and agreed to put the mediator's proposals to a vote without any firm assurances from the government that the class-size and class-composition issues will be addressed.

The BCFL leadership, in particular, moved aggressively to end the strike, which had sparked sympathy walkouts across the province and demands that the BCFL organize a province-wide general strike. Over the heads of the BCTF leadership, BCFL President Jim Sinclair announced Thursday that teachers would be voting on the mediator's recommendations, and then, to underline that the BCFL was determined to put an end to the strike, he announced that the federation was canceling any action in support of the teachers on Friday. The message was clear—if the teachers rejected the mediator's report and continued to challenge the government, the BCFL

would work alongside the courts to isolate and break the strike.

The agreement ending the strike not only does not call for the lifting of a C\$500,000 fine imposed on the BCTF Friday, it leaves the union and teachers open to further reprisals. Speaking Friday, the government's special prosecutor in the teachers' strike, Len Doust, said he had yet to decide whether to ask the court to rule that the strike constituted criminal contempt, action that would make the union, strike leaders and even individual teachers liable to massive fines and jail terms.



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