Canada: BC Federation of Labour moves to end teachers' strike

Union officials force vote on "facilitator's" report

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The executive of the British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF), under pressure from the BC Federation of Labour (BCFL), has "reluctantly" recommended that the province's 40,000 public elementary and high school teachers vote this weekend to end their two-week-old strike and accept the recommendations of "facilitator" Vince Ready.

Ready's recommendations have likewise been endorsed by British Columbia Premier Gordon Campbell and his Liberal government.

Meanwhile, BC Supreme Court Justice Brenda Brown fined the BCTF $500,000 for civil contempt of court at a hearing Friday. Justice Brown said she would have imposed much harsher penalties if it did not appear that the strike would soon be over.

The government's endorsement of Ready's recommendations is not hard to understand. Bill 12 and the two-year wage freeze and concessionary contract it imposed on BC teachers remain in force. Nor have any of the rights stripped from teachers under previous Liberal laws—the rights to strike and to negotiate over class sizes and workloads—been restored.

Under Ready's recommendations, the government will provide an additional $105 million for teachers and the school system. But as Campbell boasted at a news conference Friday, all of this money will come from the estimated $160 million the government has saved by not having to pay the wages of striking teachers and of public sector workers who staged sympathy walkouts.

Ready's report calls for the government to provide $40 million to harmonize teachers' salaries across the province, make a one-time $40 million payment toward the teachers' long-term disability fund (the government pays the disability premiums of other public sector workers, but not teachers), to raise by $20 million to $170 million the additional funding the government has earmarked for improving learning conditions, and to give $5 million to raise the salaries of some replacement teachers.

On the key issue of class sizes, the Ready report calls on the government to amend the School Act to ensure that the proscribed limits are not just averages across school districts, but that there are definite maximums for individual classes in grades 4 to 12. So serious is the problem of class sizes, the government long ago had to concede that they should be reduced. But Ready rejected the BCTF's demand that teachers be able to grieve if class-size limits are violated. Moreover, under his proposal the government has an obligation only to "consult" with the BCTF about class sizes caps; it retains full power to fix them as it wishes. Similarly, Ready's report gives the government complete power to determine how class composition (the integration of special-needs students) impacts on class-size caps. Ready also rejected the teachers' demand for minimum teacher-pupil ratios for specialist teachers, such as teacher-librarians and counselors.

But the biggest reason of all for the government to embrace the Ready report was that the labour bureaucrats and social democratic politicians of the New Democratic Party (NDP) had made it clear that they consider the report ample pretext for their putting an end to the teachers' defiance of the antiunion laws and the mounting working class upsurge against the Liberals.

Faithful defenders of the capitalist social order, the union and NDP leaders fully share the government and corporate elite's fears that the strike movement could become the catalyst for an independent working class political offensive.

According to British Columbia's most important daily,

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the *Vancouver Sun*, the British Columbia Federation of Labour (BCFL) leadership moved aggressively Thursday to end the strike. BCFL leaders were outraged when the BCTF held a press conference Thursday morning to criticize the government's failure to seriously address teachers' concerns. When Ready released his report the BCFL leadership then set about to force teachers to vote on it.

BCFL President Jim Sinclair took it upon himself to publicly announce that the teachers would be voting on Ready's report. This was immediately contradicted by the BCTF. But ultimately the teachers union did agree to hold a vote. In the meantime, Sinclair and the BCFL executive made clear that teachers would be left to fight against the government and the courts on their own. This was demonstrated when the BCFL publicly announced that it was ceasing job action in support of the teachers "in order to allow the BC Teachers' Federation a chance to review mediator Vince Ready's recommendations."

A victory of the Liberal government over the teachers would be a major blow to the working class not only in British Columbia, but across Canada.

To successfully oppose the machinations of the union and NDP leaders requires the elaboration of a new political strategy based on the recognition that in challenging the assault on public education and antiunion laws, teachers and their supporters are challenging not just the policy of the Campbell Liberal government, but the class strategy of the entire Canadian bourgeoisie and international capital.

Teachers and their supporters should 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.

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