

British Columbia strikes show workers need new perspective

Carl Bronski
25 October 2007

Over the past several months a series of strikes in British Columbia, Canada's most western province, has highlighted an increased level of militancy amongst unionized workers and, on the flip side, the complicity of the unions and the social-democratic New Democratic Party in the offensive against the working class.

Last July, almost six thousand Vancouver municipal workers, organized in three separate locals of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), began what would become a bitter twelve-week strike against a right-wing Vancouver City Council led by Mayor Sam Sullivan and his "Non-Partisan Committee." The Vancouver municipal workers were joined in a series of intermittent strikes by library workers in Victoria, which lies just across the Georgia Strait on Vancouver Island. Before its settlement last week, the Vancouver strike would become the second longest in the city's history.

With BC's Lower Mainland in the midst of a mini-boom spurred by natural resource exports to Asia and preparations for the Winter Olympics, which will be held in nearby Whistler in 2010, the municipal workers were demanding wage settlements commensurate with deals reached by similar sections of the workforce in the general vicinity. City workers in such surrounding suburbs as North Vancouver and Richmond had earlier settled on contracts providing for average wage increases of 17.5 percent over five years. But with sky-rocketing living costs on the lower mainland, particularly in housing, these contracts will do little to advance workers' living standards after years of wage austerity.

Previous municipal worker contracts had been for three years. New contracts of a similar duration would expire in the midst of the Olympic year, which would give the workers some additional bargaining power. Vancouver's city management was adamant that this could not be allowed. For their own part, the union leadership was, from the outset, willing to bargain away this leverage, saying they were willing to discuss a longer term deal if city management would look favorably on their pay and special Olympic dispute-settlement demands.

At the same time, over five thousand forestry workers organized by the United Steelworkers of America (USWA) took strike action against Forest Industrial Relations (FIR), the bargaining agent for the numerous wood product companies along Canada's Pacific coast. Workers there were resisting attempts by the lumber companies to impose an alternative work-shift schedule, arguing that this measure would lead to a further increase in workplace accidents, an issue of particular concern in the already dangerous logging industry.

Woodworkers are compelled to labour anywhere from 12 to 16 hours per day. Since 2005, figures show that 65 forestry workers have been killed on the job. This was the legacy of the last contract

imposed on the workforce almost four years ago.

In December 2003, International Wood and Allied Workers Union (IWA) President Dave Haggard—the IWA subsequently merged with the USWA—stood beside BC Liberal Premier Gordon Campbell as he announced that his government would, with the union's support, enact emergency legislation to force an end to a three-week-old strike by 10,000 workers in BC's coastal forest industry. It was the IWA leadership that invited the government to strip its members of their right to strike and impose binding arbitration, for it feared that otherwise it would not be able to coerce its members into accepting the massive contract concessions demanded by the industry. It came as no surprise that Haggard subsequently left the ranks of the NDP to stand as a candidate for the federal Liberal Party.

Over the past two weeks all three strikes by Vancouver municipal workers as well as the forestry workers' walkout have been resolved in the face of significant opposition from rank-and-file workers.

Despite strong support from the general public in the confrontation with Sullivan's City Hall—the dispute had become popularly known as "Sam's Strike"—the CUPE leadership confined the strike within the narrowest collective bargaining framework, even as Sullivan arrogantly refused to come to the negotiating table. Indeed, the mayor boasted to the *Globe and Mail* that settling the city-wide strike, which had stopped all residential municipal garbage pickup, closed parks, government offices, libraries, and youth and senior care centres, was not one of his top priorities.

Speculation was rife that Sullivan and the right-wing dominated City Council were more than willing to allow the strike to drag on into the autumn and thereby save millions of dollars in wages. Sullivan clearly had the measure of the opposition he was facing. Amongst the provincial trade union bureaucracy there was no attempt to stop garbage transfers to suburban depots organized by other CUPE locals or widen the struggle by rallying working people in an all-out confrontation with City Hall. For her own part, NDP leader Carole James was careful to confine her political posturing to support for the inexorable working out of the collective bargaining process.

With matters at an impasse, CUPE agreed in late September to submit the dispute to non-binding mediation. After receiving submissions from both sides, mediator Brian Foley handed down his recommendations in early October.

The largest local, CUPE Local 15, representing 2,500 building inspectors, recreation workers, civic theatre employees, by-law enforcement officers, cleaners and ancillary staff, voted in favour of the recommendations by 73 percent after their local union leaders endorsed the deal. The new contract provides for a wage increase of 17.5 per cent over five years and a \$1,000 signing bonus, a special

Winter Olympic dispute-resolution process and six-month notice of the contracting-out of work.

However, the two other striking CUPE locals initially failed to ratify the recommendations presented to them after their local leaderships called for rejection of the contracts. Eighteen hundred workers organized in CUPE Local 1004, which oversees two separate contracts, one for water, sewage, street repairs and garbage collection and the other for Parks and Recreation, were advised by their union leadership to vote down the contract. Local by-laws require that contracts must be ratified by at least a two-thirds majority of voting members. But only 58 percent of parks workers and 57 percent of outside city workers voted in favour of the mediator's recommendations.

Eight hundred library workers organized in CUPE Local 391 were also advised by the union leadership to vote down a contract that provided for larger wage increases for 300 members and less for the other 500. Members were adamant that their pay equity demands should not be used to penalize higher paid workers as the mediator had proposed. As a result, the contract was voted down.

However, only days later, virtually identical offers were put to the memberships, this time with the union leadership recommending acceptance because of certain "tweaks" in their provisions. This time, workers in both of the still striking locals voted to ratify the new contracts. It has been estimated that up to 20 percent of the striking workers will not return to their jobs, after having sought out alternative employment during the dispute.

At the same time as City of Vancouver workers were returning to their jobs, forestry workers were voting on a deal that was recommended by the union leadership but resisted by a significant section of the membership. Despite its adamancy that the forest companies' attempt to re-write shift scheduling provisions must be stopped, union officials placed before the locals a deal that gives management the right to alter schedules after simply providing a "business case" to do so. Virtually every local on Vancouver Island turned down the deal by a significant majority. However, the largest local, based on the lower mainland coast and Queen Charlotte Islands, narrowly approved the deal after union officials threatened that a no-vote could mean that another employer offer would not be tabled until the spring. In the end, the contract passed with 51 percent voting for ratification.

Workers in British Columbia have over the past several years engaged in a series of militant strikes against both the government and private employers, including the mobilization of over forty thousand provincial hospital workers in the spring of 2004 that saw the British Columbia Federation of Labour and the Hospital Employees Union scuttle a general strike at the eleventh hour and sign a deal that enshrined a 15 percent pay cut and massive job losses.

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.

The pro-business "Non-Partisan Committee" that controls Vancouver City Council has taken cues for its intransigence directly from developments at the provincial level. Over the last five years, British Columbia's Liberal government led by Premier Gordon

Campbell has emerged as the spearhead of corporate Canada's assault on the working class. Since the beginning of 2002, it has:

- Implemented a plan to cut the province's civil service by 12,000 or one-third;
- Rushed legislation through an emergency session of the provincial legislature that imposes contracts on 45,000 public school teachers and empowers school boards and colleges to dictate teacher workload and class sizes;
- Used a similar emergency law to rob tens of thousands of health care and social service workers of job security protection and bumping rights;
- Announced a welfare "reform" under which those deemed employable will have their benefits cut and be conscripted into workfare or training schemes;
- Carried through a three-year austerity plan that froze health and education spending—in reality a multi-billion dollar cut because of inflation and population growth—and imposed an average 25 percent spending cut on all other government departments;
- Scrapped a freeze on university and college tuitions and announced that henceforth the province's post-secondary institutions will be free to set their own fees; and
- Instituted various anti-union changes to the provincial labor code.

However, in the face of these attacks, current BC New Democratic Party (NDP) leader Carole James has stated that should her party come to power, she would not roll back the reams of anti-working class legislation passed by the Liberal government. Neither has this outright statement of agreement with the Campbell government by the NDP prevented the province's trade union movement from continuing to promote the illusion that the only way forward for working people is to cast a vote for James and company.

For the past two decades, the NDP and the trade union bureaucracy have been complicit with every other government in Canada, whether federal or provincial, Liberal, Conservative, Parti Quebecois, or Social Credit, in slashing wages, public and social services and attacking 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 MP) 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.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact