

British Columbia criminalizes teachers' strike to force through wage cut

Vic Neufeld
28 March 2012

Events in British Columbia over the past month have exposed not only the provincial Liberal government's vicious assault on worker rights, but also the role of the unions and New Democratic Party (NDP) in demobilizing teacher and student resistance to the attack on living standards and quality education.

In the wake of a province-wide three-day strike by 41,000 teachers, the Liberal government of Premier Christy Clark passed Bill 22 on March 15. The new law suspends teachers' right to strike and effectively imposes a new concessionary contract. Bill 22, also known as the Education Improvement Act, was introduced in the legislature on the heels of a February 28 Labour Relations Board (LRB) interim order that allowed the teachers' federation to expand its job action to include a three-day strike. Rushed through the parliamentary process with minimal discussion and debate, the new Act imposes a strike-free "cooling-off" period that runs until August 31.

The legislation also appoints a mediator to facilitate bargaining with the ostensible goal of reaching a negotiated mediated, but stipulates that any settlement must be within the government's "zero net mandate"—i.e. it must not increase labor costs above the current level for at least two years. If the process does not result in a new collective agreement by August, Education Minister John Abbott has indicated the government will recall the provincial parliament and impose a concessionary contract through legislation.

The Liberal government's introduction of Bill 22 underscored that teachers face a political struggle and meant that the March 5-7 strike took on the airs of a political protest.

Up to that point, BC's teachers, who carry an "essential service" designation, had only been allowed to undertake limited "Phase 1" job action in support of collective bargaining. Bargaining had essentially collapsed, however, in the face of the government's insistence that any agreement must conform with its "zero net bargaining" framework.

The government's "zero net" mandate is part of a larger international assault on public services that is occurring in North America, Europe, Australia and elsewhere. In Canada media outlets have characterized Canadian education as "lurching into an era of austerity"—an era where "cash-strapped" governments contend that fiscal restraint is non-negotiable. For BC teachers, "zero net" means that teachers must either accept a cut in their real wages or finance pay increases through an increased workload and layoffs or other concessions that will undermine the quality of education that they provide.

The BC Liberal government's austerity claims are bogus, however. Over the past ten years it has cut taxes significantly on corporations and for high-income earners. These tax cuts have drastically shrunk government revenue, resulting in cuts to public services including education.

On the strike's second day, 5,000 teachers and their supporters converged on the grounds of the BC Legislature in Victoria. Despite an LRB order forbidding picketing and any other unauthorized job actions, teachers set up pickets in front of government offices in Victoria and in parts of the lower mainland.

Both the picketing and subsequent rallies demonstrated strong public support for the teachers. Thousands of high school students in Vancouver and across BC walked out of classes. Two thousand government workers in the provincial capital of Victoria refused to cross the picket lines set up by the teachers. This resulted in a speedy government protest to the LRB against teachers' "illegal" picketing. The matter was quickly dropped when the BC Teachers' Federation (BCTF) promised the Board that no further picketing would occur at government offices.

Despite the strong popular support for the teachers, both the opposition New Democrats and the union leadership are intent on assisting the government in imposing its austerity measures. NDP threats to filibuster Bill 22 were so much face-saving bluster. The Liberal government, as expected, quickly used its majority to invoke closure and force a vote on the Bill's passage. In any event, the NDP's main

objection has been to the government's "interference" in collective bargaining, not its attempts to attack teacher's living standards and students' quality of education.

As the social democrats well know, collective bargaining has not served as any brake on the government's "net zero" mandate. As of mid-February, 61 of 176 public sector collective agreements have been ratified consistent with the concessionary "net zero" mandate and a further 28 tentative agreements that conform to the mandate await ratification. There are also 41 collective agreements where there is an "agreement in principle" consistent with the mandate. These 130 agreements cover 75 percent of BC's almost 300,000 unionized public sector employees and three-quarters of all public sector collective agreements.

The government's determination to enforce its wage and job-cutting "net zero" mandate is heightened by the fact that most of these collective agreements include what is colloquially referred to as a "me too" clause. This clause stipulates that if the government breaks the "net-zero" framework in any other contract, the collective agreement must be re-opened to allow negotiations over total compensation for the remainder of its term. In other words, a successful teachers' challenge to the government's "mandate" would reverberate throughout the entire public service.

A coordinated union strategy to smash reverse the "net-zero" mandate has not happened, however. Instead, union leaders have helped impose and legitimate the government's austerity agenda. During the three-day teacher strike BC Federation of Labour President Jim Sinclair told reporters that although a majority of public sector unions have negotiated within the government's "net zero" bargaining framework, the difference with the teachers is that they are having a settlement imposed upon them: "Maybe at the end of the day if there was real bargaining, [the teachers] might have accepted some zeros too. But no-one else was bullied into zeros."

Similarly, when BCTF President Susan Lambert boasted about the Federation's work to get into independent mediation, she stated, "We agreed to modify our proposals significantly and made it clear that teachers were willing to compromise on every objective, including salary. As I have said many times: Everything is negotiable." In other words, the union leadership's message is that government should use the collective bargaining processes to impose and legitimize its austerity agenda, instead of trying to unilaterally impose it.

The Liberal government has been emboldened both by the union leadership's collaboration and by its success in the decade-long evisceration of public education. In the past ten

years, over \$3.3 billion (in current dollars) has been taken from education budgets to finance the government's tax cuts for the rich. Bill 22 is the twentieth piece of Liberal legislation since 2001 that targets teachers. On every occasion, the union leadership and their allies in the NDP have been unable and unwilling to mobilize workers and students in an effective fight against these attacks.

There is some indication that teachers are beginning to question the leadership's bankrupt strategy. As the Federation began its 96th annual general meeting last week, a faction circulated a pamphlet calling for a province-wide strike by public-school teachers that would continue until the Liberal government repealed its legislation. To address fears about the hefty fines permitted under the new law for those who take part in illegal strikes (up to \$475 per employee for each day of an illegal strike and not less than \$1.3 million a day for the BCTF), the pamphlet proposed that teachers simply refuse to return to work until all penalties were lifted.

As the annual meeting wrapped up, the Federation announced a plan of action, which is designed to demobilize the rank-and-file and lead teachers into a political dead end. The plan includes a legal challenge to Bill 22 and future votes on the withdrawal of all voluntary extra-curricular activities, along with a vague and very-much hedged threat to stage a protest strike against Bill 22 at an unspecified date in the future.

The time has come for rank and file teachers to reconsider a political perspective foisted on them by the unions and the NDP that results in their wages and working conditions being negotiated away, and that regularly fails to protect both theirs and the public's interest in securing accessible, quality education. Teachers must break organizationally and politically from the pro-capitalist unions and NDP and oppose the subordination of workers' needs to private profit. To launch a viable fight back they must take the leadership of their struggle out of the hands of the union bureaucrats through the building of rank-and-file committees, independent of and in opposition to the BCTF, and make their non-concessions struggle the spearhead of an industrial and political offensive of the entire working class in defense of jobs, decent wages, pensions, and public services.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact