

British Columbia teachers mount rotating walkouts

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Forty-one thousand elementary and high school teachers in British Columbia are mounting rotating one-day walkouts this week and next to press their demands for a pay increase, reduced class sizes, and increased educational funding.

The BC Public School Employers' Association (BCPSEA) responded to the limited job action by imposing a partial lockout and announcing that teachers' pay will be cut by 10 percent until a settlement is reached with the BC Teachers' Federation (BCTF).

Earlier, the BCPSEA had threatened to impose a 5 percent temporary pay cut to punish teachers for participating in the BCTF's "first phase" of job action. Launched in late April, the first phase called for teachers not to communicate with administrators in writing and with students when outside the classroom or extra-curricular activities.

Ostensibly independent, the BCPSEA takes its marching orders from the provincial Liberal government.

In office since 2001, the Liberals have ravaged education budgets, driving up class sizes, reducing teacher-support programs, and repeatedly slashed teachers' wages and benefits.

Time and again the government has used anti-worker and strike-breaking laws to impose these attacks and the BCTF and the BC Federation of Labour (BCFL) have meekly complied.

The government claims that it currently has no plans to legalize the teachers' job action and impose a contract by government fiat. All this means is that it first intends to see if it can cajole the unions into assuming direct responsibility for imposing the government's austerity agenda through a "negotiated" agreement.

BC was long-known as a center of union militancy. But as across Canada and around the world, the unions, over the past three decades, have imposed wage and job cuts and integrated themselves ever-more completely into corporate management.

Responding to Wednesday's announcement from the BCTF that rotating walkouts will continue next week, BC Premier Christy Clark cynically accused teachers of hurting their pupils' learning and inconveniencing parents. "I hope it doesn't happen," said Clark. "This has been terrible for parents. It has been terrible for students."

The reality is Clark and her Liberals are more than willing to sacrifice quality education for BC's children and otherwise savage public services so as to funnel tax cuts to big business and the well-to-do.

As for holding children hostage, a court earlier this year found that the government had bargained in bad faith with the deliberate aim of provoking a teachers' strike so as to incite public ire against the teachers and justify further rollbacks in their wages and working conditions.

The government's punitive 10 percent pay cut, which is in addition to the money docked from teachers for the time they are actually on strike, underscores that it is girding for a showdown with the teachers. The BCTF and BCFL, meanwhile, are limiting teachers to rotating walkouts. They are adamantly opposed to making the teachers' strike the spearhead of a broader working class challenge to the Liberals' austerity program and anti-worker laws.

At a provincial Labour Board meeting Thursday called at the BCTF's request, union lawyers argued that the pay cut was illegal, while the government defended it. The Board said that it will render a ruling next Wednesday.

As the result of repeated NDP (New Democratic Party) and Liberal “wage restraint” programs, the real wages of BC teachers have eroded significantly over the past two decades. In seven of the past fifteen years teachers had no wage increase whatsoever and the government’s current offer of a 7.3 percent increase spread over six years includes a wage-freeze for the first two years.

The government’s derisory wage offer is in keeping with its effective refusal to discuss teachers’ demands for reduced class sizes, caps on the number of special-needs students per class, and increased ratios of librarians and other resource teachers.

As BC’s Education Minister, Clark authored legislation in 2002 that stripped teachers of the right to bargain collectively over class sizes, class composition, and the number of specialist teachers. Bill 28 has twice been found to be unconstitutional, but the government is appealing those rulings.

In the meantime, it claims to be willing to negotiate with the BCTF over class sizes, but this is a farce, since it is insisting that the status quo—i.e. the increased class size ratios imposed in the wake of Bill 28’s passage—be maintained. Since 2002 more than 2,500 teaching jobs have been eliminated and many qualified teachers are now only able to find temporary contract jobs.

In a recent statement, BC’s Minister of Education said “class size and composition can be dealt with at the table and BCPSEA (is) more than willing to sit down and have an open dialogue with the union.” However it then added: “Any new collective agreement on class size and composition must, first and foremost, support modern, effective and flexible approaches that meet the needs of students (not just the union) and also recognize that there are limits on what B.C. taxpayers can afford.”

The BCTF has indicated that it is ready to be “flexible,” i.e. to scale back and abandon teachers’ demand for the restoration of the pre-2002 class size limits and class composition guarantees.

The trade union-supported NDP has criticized the Liberals’ handling of the teachers’ dispute. But it has repeatedly made clear its basic agreement with the government’s assault on public education and teachers’ wages and working conditions. At most, even in its elections manifestos, the NDP has called for only partial restoration of the massive education funding

cuts made by the Liberals and it has embraced the huge tax cuts the Liberals have lavished on big business and the rich—cuts aimed at ensuring the government lacks the means to fund decent public services.

The author also recommends:

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