

British Columbia teachers' strike enters second week

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Forty-one thousand British Columbia public school teachers have begun their second week of province-wide strike action.

The teachers are demanding an 8 percent wage increase spread over five years, a \$5,000 signing bonus, improvements to the benefits package and the establishment of a \$225 million per year fund to address class size and composition issues.

The big business Liberal government of Premier Christy Clark has responded with a wage offer of 7 percent over six years (with a wage freeze for the first two years), a \$1,200 signing bonus and a meagre \$375 million over five years to improve "learning conditions" in the heavily overcrowded and underfunded public school system.

As the result of repeated New Democratic Party (NDP) and Liberal "wage restraint" programs, the real wages of BC teachers have eroded significantly over the past two decades. In seven of the past 15 years teachers had no wage increase whatsoever. The last teachers' contract expired over a year ago.

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 British Columbia Teachers Federation (BCTF) and the BC Federation of Labour (BCFL) have meekly complied.

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.

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 addition to increased class sizes, teachers face growing demands and challenges due to changes in the make-up of the student body. A quarter of all public school classes in BC have four or more "special needs", i.e. physically or mentally impaired, pupils. Moreover, teachers must tend to large numbers of students for whom English is a second language, including in higher grades. More than 10 percent of the total BC public school population is defined as English Language Learners (ELLs).

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 union is also abiding by a court order that teachers monitor exams of the Grade 12 graduating class and file final marks before the end of the school year on Friday. The BCTF has yet to announce whether the strike will carry over into the summer school session.

Last week, the BCTF further reduced its wage demand, but the government tartly dismissed the concession.

The BCTF, said Education Minister Peter Fassbender, "wants to stay in their own orbit. They don't want to recognize the realities of our economy, of the needs of taxpayers. And their compensation demands are twice what the other unions have settled for."

After negotiations collapsed late last week, the BCTF claimed that a compromise could be easily found if the government would only allow veteran labor mediator Vince Ready join the talks. The government did in fact ask Ready to serve as mediator, but on Sunday he declined. Ready pleaded he was too busy to take on the assignment, but most observers believe he refused to act as mediator because he deemed the gulf between the

two sides as unbridgeable.

In the three weeks prior to the all-out strike, the BCTF conducted a series of rotating strikes. The government responded by imposing a partial lockout on all provincial teachers that restricted preparatory time and by announcing a 10 percent across-the-board wage cut (in addition to the monies deducted for participating in the rotating one-day walkouts.).

Reports have already surfaced of special food banks being set up to administer to the needs of hard-pressed teachers who are not receiving any picket-duty pay from the union. The BCTF had previously drained the strike fund to pay for a series of costly court battles against legislation passed by the Liberal government that attacked teachers' collective bargaining rights and gave it the legal authority to slash public education funding.

In 2002, when Clark was education minister, the Liberal government passed legislation that prohibited teachers from negotiating class size and other related matters in their collective agreements. After a lengthy litigation process, the B.C. Supreme Court ruled in 2011 that the government's action was unconstitutional as it violated Section 2 of the Charter of Rights guaranteeing freedom of association.

However, rather than immediately striking down the offending legislation, the court gave the government 12 months to re-draft the law. Clark, who was now the provincial premier, responded by pushing through the legislature a bill that was almost identical to the one previously ruled as unconstitutional. In April 2013, that legislation was also found to be in violation of workers' rights after a second round of litigation. The government was ordered by the court to pay the BCTF \$2 million in damages. The Liberals are appealing the ruling.

Last February NDP leader Adrian Dix revealed that court transcripts describing conversations between chief government negotiator Paul Straszak and a deputy minister in the government showed that the Liberals' negotiating strategy all along had been to provoke a strike by the BCTF, then impose a legislated concessionary contract.

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.

Since the strike began, the NDP has restricted their "support" of the teachers' to an appeal by education critic Rob Fleming for the Liberals to "get serious" in the negotiations. For their own part, the British Columbia Federation of Labour has simply asked its members to support "demonstrations of solidarity" and to visit picket lines to bolster the morale of the strikers.



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