Talks to end BC teachers' strike collapse

Keith Jones
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Talks to end a province-wide strike by 41,000 British Columbia public school teachers collapsed this week when the province's Liberal government refused to even discuss teachers' demands for a $225 million per annum increase in education funding.

For the better part of a week, negotiators for the British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF) and the government had held "exploratory discussions" with Justice Stephen Kelleher to determine whether the B.C. Supreme Court judge should mediate their protracted contract dispute. But on Wednesday, the two sides announced that these talks had been abandoned.

The BCTF has repeatedly scaled back its demands. In a press release deploring the failure of mediation, BCTF President Jim Iker observed that the difference between the wage increase being sought by the union and that being offered by the government is now just one percentage point. While the union is ready to settle for a total wage increase of eight percent in a five-year contract, the government is insisting on a six-year contract containing a seven percent increase.

The BCTF's retreats have only emboldened the government. During the recent "exploratory talks," the government baldly announced that it would not respond to the BCTF's demands for a cap on class sizes, the hiring of additional specialist teachers, and other measures to deal with the growing number of "special needs" students until the union accepts its miserly wage offer.

"There is no process and no mediator that can bridge this gap at this time," Education Minister Peter Fassbender told reporters. "To pretend otherwise only raises false expectations and serves to delay the tough decisions the BCTF executive needs to make to get to an affordable agreement."

The Liberal education minister repeated his claim that the BCTF's demands would jeopardize the government's "fiscal framework"—i.e., its plans to balance the budget and maintain rock-bottom taxes on big business and the incomes of the rich and super-rich. Fassbender demanded that the BCTF follow other public sector unions that have accepted contracts that conform to this reactionary framework or what the government calls its "affordability zone" for "economic stability."

Mediation "might help," said Fassbender, "if the parties were in the same zone." But, "the BCTF executive would not commit to tabling a set of demands that fall in the same affordability zone as the other public sector agreements reached to date."

As a result of years of Liberal and New Democratic Party (NDP) "wage restraint" programs, teachers in BC are the second lowest paid in Canada—and this in a province where living costs, especially for housing, are among the country's highest.

Nonetheless, the key issue in the clash between the province's teachers and the big business Liberal government is the state of BC's public education system, which has been ravaged by years of spending cuts and the government's promotion of private schools.

In 2002, shortly after they came to power and as part of an across-the-board attack on public services and the workers' who administer them, the Liberals enacted legislation stripping teachers of the right to negotiate class sizes and class composition—an increasingly important issue due to the integration of "special needs" students and the growing number of students for whom English is a second language. The Liberals then arbitrarily imposed new norms allowing for much larger classes and on this basis slashed hundreds of millions of dollars from the education budget. This resulted in the loss of thousands of teaching positions and a serious deterioration in the quality of education.

The Liberals' 2002 legislation—which was authored by the then education minister and now premier,

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Christy Clark—was struck down by a BC court as unconstitutional. So too was a BC Liberal law passed in 2012 that illegalized a teachers' strike and reaffirmed the government's unilateral power to determine class sizes and composition.

None of this has deterred the government and big business. They are determined to maintain the cuts imposed a decade ago and, for all intents and purposes, the Liberals have ignored the court rulings concerning teachers' right to bargain collectively over their working conditions. During the current 16 month-long contract negotiation, the government has systematically refused to negotiate over class sizes and composition.

The government claims that to restore the class size caps that existed prior to 2002 would cost $2 billion. While the government is trumpeting this figure as proof of how "unreasonable" the teachers' demands are, it in reality constitutes a damning admission of the scope of the cuts implemented in 2002 and of the damage done to the public education system.

In an action that exemplifies big business's support for the dismantling of public education, one of BC's major employer lobby groups, the Coalition of BC Businesses, announced this week that it would join the government in seeking to overturn the lower court rulings against their Bills 22, 27 and 28. The Coalition is asking for "intervenor" status in the case when it is heard by BC's Court of Appeal.

If the lower courts' ruling stand, declared Coalition Chairman Mark von Schellwitz, the government will have to raise taxes or incur a budget deficit and "this will reduce British Columbia's competitiveness and will have a negative impact on our economy."

There is widespread support for the teachers among working people. But the BCTF and the trade unions as a whole are doing nothing to mobilize this support. Far from preparing for a full-scale confrontation with the Liberal government, big business and the courts, they are doing everything to isolate the teachers strike and prevent it from becoming a political struggle aimed at mobilizing the working class against the austerity agenda of the Liberal government and the ruling class a whole.

Over the past quarter century, the unions have systematically suppressed the class struggle, openly collaborating with the NDP in imposing austerity, when the social democrats formed BC's government from 1991–2002, and sabotaging one working-class challenge after another to the current Liberal regime.

The BCTF waited until June 17, i.e., the effective end of the school year, before even calling an all-out strike. Moreover, the union has bowed before a series of anti-worker rulings from the provincial labour board, including a ruling illegalizing the strike—on the grounds that it is disrupting an "essential service"—at the small number of schools and youth custodial facilities that function year-round. These ruling are setting legal precedents that can and will be used to illegalize the strike as whole.

The BCTF-backed NDP, meanwhile, has announced that it would support the naming of an "industrial inquiry commissioner" into the BC teachers' contract dispute. Under BC law such a commission can be empowered to dictate a contract settlement.

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