

“Children are being sacrificed to save money”—striking British Columbia teacher

A WSWS reporter
12 July 2014

Forty-one thousand British Columbia teachers are now in their fourth week of a province-wide strike.

The key issue in the strike is the provincial Liberal government’s assault on public education. Shortly after taking office in 2001, the Liberals—as part of a wider attack on public services and the workers who administer them—passed legislation reopening teachers’ contracts. Bill 27 and 28 gutted class-size and class-composition guarantees and abolished teachers’ right to collectively bargain with the government over these issues.

This legislation and a subsequent 2012 law illegalizing a provincial teachers’ strike and reaffirming the government’s arrogation of the power to dictate class sizes and composition have been found unconstitutional by a BC Superior Court. But the government, with strong support from big business, is appealing that decision and insists that there can be no rolling back of the hundreds of millions of dollars in annual education cuts imposed since 2002. These cuts have left per capita education spending in BC among the lowest in Canada.

The government is insisting on a six-year contract—it originally demanded a 10-year agreement—containing wage and benefit increases totaling just seven percent. Since teachers’ wages have been frozen for the past two years, this would in reality mean a seven percent increase over 8 years, far below the expected inflation rate.

Although BC’s Liberal government has repeatedly used legislation to criminalize teacher job action and impose contracts by legal fiat and the federal Conservative government has repeatedly illegalized strikes, Education Minister Peter Fassbender is claiming that the Liberals have no intention of resorting to a legislated “settlement.”

Its clear preference is to compel the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation (BCTF) and the union bureaucracy as a whole to visibly take responsibility for ending the strike on the government’s terms. Time and again BC’s unions have smothered militant challenges to the government and corporate power, systematically isolating strikes and either directly imposing concessionary contracts or ordering workers to return-to-work when the government illegalized their job action.

With most schools shut down for the summer holidays, the government has rejected any further talks with the BCTF until

it enters the government’s “affordability zone”—i.e. it abandons teachers’ demands for a substantial increase in education funding. The government is clearly hoping to starve the teachers into submission. The BCTF says it cannot afford to provide teachers with strike pay, because its financial resources have been exhausted by the various court challenges it has mounted to the government’s legislation attacking teachers and public education.

The official opposition, the social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP), enjoys close ties with the BCTF leadership and is posturing as a friend of the teachers. However, the NDP has repeatedly pledged its support for the reactionary fiscal framework established by years of tax cuts for big business and the rich. And like the unions, the NDP has helped enforced the anti-strike legislation adopted by federal and provincial governments across Canada. In Ontario, it sustained a Liberal government in office that imposed sweeping social spending cuts and used Bill 115 to illegalize teacher job-action and impose real wage cuts on teachers.

The NDP’s attitude to any genuine challenge to the austerity agenda of the ruling class was exemplified by its opposition to the 2012 Quebec student strike. The NDP refused to even nominally support the students or condemn the Quebec Liberal government when it passed draconian legislation (Bill 78) that effectively illegalized the strike and placed unprecedented restrictions on the right to demonstrate.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Dan a striking teacher from Delta, a Vancouver suburb. Since gaining his education degree in 2010, Dan has both worked on-call as a substitute teacher and taught Kindergarten on one-year contracts at two different Delta Schools.

“My class sizes have varied, but have been anywhere from 18 to 22 students. In respect to special needs students, the challenge with Kindergarten is that it is the entry point into the school system and a large number of the children coming in haven’t been identified yet as having issues which require special attention—ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder), ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), behavioural difficulties, etc. Testing for these things is often a long process and the system doesn’t allocate money to anything it doesn’t have to. So children with severe issues often don’t get any

support at all until at least Grade 1.

“Some money is available for children who have demonstrated repeated problematic behaviour such as violence and running away into the halls or off of school property. But this money is limited and only gets allocated after a pattern has been demonstrated. Also, it usually only pays for part time support, so even in extreme circumstances the teacher is the only adult responsible for managing potentially dangerous or disruptive behaviour all the time.

“In my 4 years teaching I’ve had children in my classrooms who are aggressive, non-compliant, autistic (diagnosed later), and wards of the state suffering from major emotional trauma. However, despite advocacy on my behalf from kind administrators and behavioural experts working for the School Board, I have never had more than partial assistance in maintaining a safe, functional learning environment in my classroom.”

In response to a question about the political issues raised by the strike, Dan said: “The BC Liberals made their agenda clear within the first year of being elected. They abolished the tuition freeze in this province, making post-secondary education expensive or unaffordable for people of lower incomes, and legislated the bus drivers’ union back to work. They are corporate union-busters who seek to undermine fair negotiating and are the single-minded proponents of policies that serve to drive a deeper and wider wedge between the rich and the poor.

“Making a reasonable education available only to those who can pay for it and bogging post-secondary grads down under crushing debt from student loans is as much proof as anyone should need that their policies are destructive and barbaric. Social investment rather than corporate investment is the hallmark of a truly responsible government and the BC Liberals have shifted further from the former and deeper into the latter over the last decade.

“I’ve been very pleased to see a number of supportive statements come out from NDP MLAs (Members of the Legislative Assembly) with regards to our struggle.

“It was during the NDP’s time in office that we began the process of integrating special needs students into the regular class room—a very progressive move at the time and one I support. Speaking with teachers who were active at the time, the plan came with the promise of extra funding for support. That has been eroded away by the current government over their term in office. This process was facilitated by the unconstitutional act of tearing up our contracts and removing class size and composition from the bargaining process completely. That has ultimately left all students high and dry, with the special needs students receiving less support now than when they were segregated.

Dan warned that the “powers that be” are trying to “demonize” the striking teachers, but that this has provoked a spirited response from teachers and the broader public. “There is a grassroots element to this struggle which is unique, as

many teachers and voters have taken it upon themselves to use social media as a tool to undermine the BC Liberals’ expensive public relations machine.

“Although the outcome of this destructive conflict is still an open question for me, I believe my union leaders are navigating the storm as best they can.”

Dan pointed to the dismantling of public education in the US, explaining that the strike is aimed at preventing Canada going further down the same road. “We can only thank our lucky stars that (Prime Minister) Harper isn’t in a position to do anything as stupid as enact legislation like Bush’s ‘No Child Left Behind Act.’ It saddens me when I watch US television to realize that there is a cultural belief in the US that ‘good school’ and ‘expensive school’ are the same thing. Education as a commodity to be sold and marketed is frightening to me because that makes education about what is ‘popular’ and ‘saleable,’ not what is in the best interests of the student.

“If could say anything to (BC Liberal Premier) Christy Clark,” continued Dan, “I would ask her to come and do my job for a year. Just the classroom work. I would do all her lessons plans, marking, organize supplies, take care of everything that happens outside the classroom if she would just come and work with the children from Monday to Friday, 9 to 3, September to June. Get to know them. See the world from their perspective. Watch them grow. Because inevitably there will be one child in that class struggling to keep up and you always become fond of that child.

“You tell yourself not to, but you do. You ride the roller coaster of successes and failures with him throughout the year and it bonds the two of you together. You work with him, root for him and advocate for more support as the year goes on. Then, on the last day of school you send him out into the world knowing that, as hard as you’ve fought for him, you’ve sent him off to become a statistic. There is no extra support out there for him. You can’t save him and it kills you. I want Clark to know what it feels like to watch that kid leave your classroom for the last time and drive home crying. I want her to know what it feels like to watch children being sacrificed so money can be saved. I go through it every year. Every damn year.”



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