

British Columbia teachers' strike in danger

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The struggle British Columbia's 41,000 public school teachers are mounting in defence of public education is in grave danger.

With the 2014-15 school year set to begin next Tuesday, Sept. 2, big business and the political establishment have stepped up their campaign to force an end to the two-and-a-half month-old province-wide teachers' strike and to impose a "settlement" that ensures BC's schools remain chronically under-funded and short-staffed.

This strikebreaking campaign is being aided and abetted by the trade union-supported New Democratic Party (NDP), the BC Federation of Labour (BCFL), and the leadership of the BC Teachers' Federation (BCTF).

The NDP has supported the BC Liberal government's demand that teachers "suspend" their strike when contract talks between the government's proxy, the BC Public School Employers' Association, and the BCTF resume with the help of a mediator.

The BCFL, while feigning support for the teachers, is systematically isolating their struggle. Consequently, despite massive working-class support for the teachers' stand in defence of public education, the Liberals are being given carte blanche to pursue their strategy of driving the teachers, who are receiving no strike pay, ever deeper into debt and poverty.

As for the BCTF, it has done everything to limit the strike's effectiveness and prevent it from becoming a broader challenge to the Liberal government and the austerity agenda it and governments across Canada are pursuing on behalf of big business.

This includes waiting until mid-June, just days before the end of the school year, before launching the strike and bowing before various BC Labour Relations Board rulings aimed at reducing the strike's impact.

But far and away the most important manner in which the BCTF has worked to emasculate the teachers'

struggle is by denying its political and class character—by claiming that the assault on public education can be repelled through a contract settlement with the Liberal government.

BCTF President Jim Iker has spent the summer insisting that a speedy resolution to the conflict could be found if only the government were to name Vince Ready, an old hand at securing contracts that uphold the "competitiveness" of BC big business, as mediator.

But the experience of BC teachers over the past thirteen years has demonstrated time and again that teachers' just demands for massive reinvestment in public education, reduced class sizes and greater support for special-needs students cannot be reconciled with the government's austerity agenda.

Since the Liberals came to power in 2001, exploiting popular anger and frustration with an NDP government that slashed social spending and the real wages of teachers and other public sector workers, they have mounted a relentless attack on public education and the teachers who provide it.

Under Gordon Campbell and now Christy Clark, the Liberals have slashed hundreds of millions of dollars in annual funding for public education while increasing state support for private schools; cut more than 3,000 teaching jobs; and, through a battery of rightwing laws, imposed years of wage freezes and eliminated teachers' rights to bargain over class sizes and class composition.

This assault is part and parcel of a veritable social counter-revolution being pursued by governments of every political stripe across Canada and internationally. Everywhere the capitalist elite is determined to eliminate what remains of the social conquests the working class wrenched from them through the mass and revolutionary struggles of the last century—decent pensions and unemployment benefits and public services like education and health.

During the current strike, the corporate elite has once again demonstrated its full support for the dismantling of public education. In July one of BC's largest employers groups, the Coalition of BC Businesses, asked for intervener status in the court case concerning the constitutionality of the Liberals' attack on teachers' collective bargaining right, so that it could support the government's brief.

This week, the *Globe and Mail*, the country's most influential newspaper, ran an editorial and an op-ed comment by Gary Mason, its BC-based national affairs columnist, emphatically endorsing the government's hard line against the teachers. The *Globe* editorial singled out the government's arrogation of the power to dictate class sizes and composition for special praise. "Who," declared the *Globe*'s editors, "can blame a government, in times of austerity, for trying to retain control of such a crucial cost issue? ... It's the union that needs to blink."

Egged on by big business, the Liberal government has in recent weeks hardened its stance against the teachers. Signaling its readiness to keep the province's schools shut down until teachers submit to its dictates, the Liberals have announced that starting next week and for as long as the strike continues they will give parents of school children 13 and under \$40 per day for daycare or tutoring costs.

The pro-capitalist unions are utterly opposed to a working class challenge to the government's austerity agenda because they agree that basic social needs must be subordinated and sacrificed to corporate profit.

All indications are that the BCTF in collusion with the NDP and BCFL are now preparing to torpedo the strike, by calling a bargaining "truce" or suddenly accepting a sellout agreement. Should they feel unable to do so at present because of rank-and-file resistance, they will then try to demoralize teachers by leaving them to fight alone against the government and a press campaign of vilification.

Already the Vancouver Secondary Teachers' Association, one of the largest BCTF locals, has been privately polling its members as to whether the province-wide strike should be abandoned in favour of rotating walkouts or a work-to-rule campaign. Such surveys—invariably portrayed as an exercise in democracy—are used by the union officialdom as a means to confuse the membership and palm off

responsibility for the leadership's surrender.

Even the bourgeois opinion polls show strong support for the teachers. But if their struggle is not to be betrayed a fundamentally new strategy is required. The strike must be transformed into the spearhead of an independent political mobilization of the working class in BC and across Canada in defence of jobs, worker rights and public services and for workers' governments' that will radically reorganize the economy so that production is organized to meet social needs, not enrich the few.



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