

# Canada: BC government escalates attack on striking teachers

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British Columbia's Liberal government intensified its campaign to break a two-and-a-half month-old strike by the province's 41,000 public school teachers last week, in what was supposed to have been the first week of the 2014–15 academic year.

Premier Christy Clark and Education Minister Peter Fassbender sought to incite popular anger against the teachers by repeatedly lying about the issues in dispute and teachers' demands and by ordering teachers to "suspend" their strike for the benefit of "our kids."

Turning reality on its head, Premier Clark accused teachers of depriving BC's children of an education in a bid to win exorbitant benefits for themselves like "unlimited massages."

In fact, the teachers are fighting to defend public education, which has been ravaged by Liberal budget cuts, even as the Clark government increases financial support for private schools and lavishes tax cuts on big business and the rich

The teachers are seeking to restore \$300 million in annual education funding that the Liberal government slashed in 2002. This cut, whose combined impact now totals over \$3 billion, has resulted in the loss of more than 3,000 teaching jobs. The striking teachers are also fighting to restore the caps on class sizes and class composition (i.e., the number of "special needs" students) that the government eliminated in 2002. Under Bill 28, the 2002 *Education Flexibility and Choice Act*, the Liberals abolished teachers' right to collectively bargain over class sizes and composition, declared all language in teacher-contracts concerning such issues null and void, and arrogated the power to determine what limits, if any, would exist henceforth.

BC's Superior Court has twice found the government's abolition of teachers' right to bargain collectively over class sizes and composition unconstitutional and has ordered that the limits that existed prior to the imposition

of Bill 28 be restored. But the Liberals, with strong support from big business and the corporate media, have denounced the court's ruling as infringing on their "right to govern" and vowed to appeal it to the Supreme Court if necessary.

Throughout the current negotiations, the government has refused to bargain over these issues which are crucial in determining teachers' ability to provide all their students with a quality education. Now it is demanding that the BC Teachers' Federation (BCTF) agree to contact language that would effectively void the decision of the Superior Court and establish as the benchmark for any future negotiations the class size and composition limits the government unilaterally imposed after adopting Bill 28.

Till this week, Clark had refused to comment publicly on the strike, leaving the public promotion of the government's anti-teacher campaign—which includes the promise of a \$40 payment for day care or tutoring for each day of missed classes to parents of public school students 13 and under—to Fassbender and other underlings.

Her anti-teacher broadsides came less than 48 hours after the BCTF leadership had appealed to Clark to join the negotiations, claiming that her involvement could lead to a rapid resolution of the impasse at the bargaining table. Clark "can no longer sit on the sidelines," declared BCTF President Jim Iker, as if the premier, who as BC's education minister in 2002 authored Bill 28, and her closest aides have not been directing the government's campaign against the teachers from the outset.

There is strong working-class support for the teachers' stand in defence of public education. Twenty thousand school support staff workers, members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, have been refusing to cross the teachers' picket lines. Many parents have angrily rebutted government and media attempts to claim teachers

are holding school children teachers “hostage.”

But the unions, including the BCTF, are utterly opposed to expanding the strike and transforming it into an independent working-class political challenge to the Liberal government and the big business assault on public services and worker rights.

The BC Federation of Labour (BCFL), most of whose public sector affiliates have already imposed sellout-contracts that fall well within the government’s real wage-cutting “affordability zone,” is systematically isolating the teachers’ struggle. Its professed “support” is limited to the most token gestures.

The trade union-supported New Democratic Party (NDP), for its part, has joined the government in urging teachers to “suspend” their strike if the government agrees to mediated talks.

For weeks, the BCTF has been insisting that through mediation it will be possible to reconcile the government’s austerity agenda with teachers’ demands for increased education funding and a significant pay rise after years of wage freezes and government-imposed wage “restraint.”

Now the BCTF is itself pledging to short-circuit the strike and under conditions where none of the teachers’ minimal demands have been secured. BCTF President Iker announced late last week that the union will call off the strike if the government agrees to send most contract issues to binding arbitration and to conduct separate negotiations on a fund to improve learning conditions by reducing class sizes and providing more support for “special-needs” students.

Over the past three months the BCTF has repeatedly watered down teachers’ demands, including on the core issue of class size caps, claiming this will induce the government to make concessions. This has only emboldened the Liberals, who from the strike’s beginning made clear that they are more than ready to accept a prolonged shutdown of the province’s schools in order to defeat teachers’ opposition to the assault on public education.

In this it has strong support from big business, which rightly views the teachers’ strike as a challenge to its class strategy—to its drive to dismantle public services and otherwise eliminate what remains of the social rights workers won through the explosive social struggles of the last century. This strategy is being pursued by all governments, whether right or “left” across Canada, from Harper’s Conservatives to the NDP

BC’s 13-year-old Liberal government has repeatedly

criminalized teacher strikes and imposed concession contracts by legislative fiat.

But this time it is pursuing a different tack. While holding the threat of a draconian strikebreaking law in reserve, its preference would be for the BCTF to impose a sellout agreement on teachers. It calculates such a demonstrable defeat of the teachers’ militant struggle to defend public education would have a chilling impact on the working class as a whole, enabling it to press forward with social spending cuts, the privatization of public services and further attacks on workers’ rights.

The government’s chief negotiator Peter Cameron has rejected binding arbitration saying that the union must take “responsibility” for a contract that adheres to the government’s reactionary fiscal framework. “In the past there’s always been legislation,” said Cameron. “The union, has never really been in the position where they’ve had to do what other unions have done, which is pragmatically look at what’s the best they can do in a situation and go back to the members and say it’s not everything but it’s the best we can do.”

Teachers in BC must beware. The unions and the NDP are now maneuvering to shut down their province-wide strike, just as they have suppressed numerous militant struggles in BC and across Canada over the past three decades. To defeat this conspiracy, workers must be armed with a new political perspective. The strike must be relaunched as *a class struggle* —as an independent political movement of the working class that mobilizes workers in BC and across Canada in opposition to the big business assault on jobs, wages and public services and for workers’ governments that will radically reorganize socio-economic life so as to make social needs, not private profit, the animating principle.



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