

British Columbia teachers' union seeks to scuttle strike

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The BC Teachers' Federation (BCTF) is seeking to force an end to the thirteen-week-old strike by British Columbia's 41,000 public school teachers without a single one of the teachers' core demands having been met.

On Wednesday the BCTF leadership prevailed on teachers to endorse its proposal to immediately end the strike if the provincial Liberal government agrees to have virtually all issues in the protracted dispute settled by binding arbitration.

Issues that the BCTF would have determined by the arbitrator include: salaries, signing bonus, health benefits, classroom preparation-time and teachers' demand for additional funding to hire more teachers (\$175 million this year and \$225 million thereafter). The union's sole condition is that the government drop its demand for a contract-clause enshrining attacks on class-size and composition limits that a BC Superior Court has twice found were imposed unconstitutionally.

BCTF President Jim Iker announced Wednesday evening that of the 30,669 teachers who had participated in a union ballot 99.4 percent had supported the executive's proposal for binding arbitration. "Tonight," declared Iker, "BC teachers voted overwhelmingly to back the call for binding arbitration that would see an end to the strike and open our schools." He added that if the government were to accept the BCTF's proposal, teachers would report to work Thursday morning and schools could begin receiving students Friday.

Earlier in the week, the BCTF president had conceded that under binding arbitration—a process routinely employed by governments when they have illegalized job action so as to impose rollbacks and concessions—teachers' rights and their struggle to defend public education could be waylaid.

Declared Iker, "Are there risks in binding arbitration? Absolutely. We know that. What the settlement will be is

what the arbitrator will deem is the fair settlement for our teachers. And that's the commitment we're making."

The BC Liberal government, which for the past two weeks has been demanding teachers unconditionally terminate all job action, lost little time in rejecting the BCTF's plan to scuttle the strike.

For Premier Christy Clark and her government it is not enough that the union has repeatedly watered down teachers' demands. They want to impose a demonstrable defeat on the teachers, with the aim of intimidating the entire working class and intensifying their drive to make BC more profitable for capital through social spending cuts, privatization, deregulation and the funneling of ever larger tax cuts to big business and the rich.

"The results of [the BCTF] vote were widely expected," said Education Minister Peter Fassbender in a written statement issued late Wednesday evening. "As we have made clear, binding arbitration would lead to unacceptable tax increases in this case. That's because the two sides remain too far apart on wages and benefits. The best way to resolve this labour dispute remains at the negotiating table."

What cynicism and hypocrisy! During their thirteen years in office, the Liberals have repeatedly short-circuited negotiations and imposed wage- and job-cutting contracts on teachers by government decree—most infamously in 2002 when Clark, then the Education Minister, eliminated, under Bill 28, class size and class composition limits in teachers' contracts and teachers' right to bargain over these issues henceforth.

Moreover, the Liberals stand ready to once again use legislation to strip teachers of their rights to strike and bargain collectively, as sections of the corporate media—like the province's principal daily, the *Vancouver Sun*—are now demanding.

Their preference however is to bully the BCTF into imposing a sell-out agreement on teachers—an agreement

that will enshrine their status as Canada's lowest paid teachers and the gutted, government-determined class-size and composition limits.

Fassbender and the government's principal negotiator, Peter Cameron, have been quite open about this, demanding that the BCTF do as other unions have done and submit to the government's diktats, euphemistically termed "the affordability zone."

"In the past," said Cameron earlier this week, "there's always been legislation. 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."

There is mass popular support for the teachers and their struggle to defend public education.

If the BCTF, pressured behind the scenes by the BC Federation of Labour and the social-democratic NDP, is seeking to scuttle the strike it is not despite, but because of this support. The pro-capitalist unions and their NDP allies are fearful that the teachers' struggle could become the catalyst for a working-class counter-offensive against the dismantling of public services and the assault on workers' rights.

For well over two months the BC Federation of Labour (BCFED) did little more than issue the occasional press releases pledging verbal support for teachers—no matter that the BCTF had no funds to provide teachers with strike pay.

This week, the BCFED and other unions have come forward with offers of loans and in some cases modest donations, but only as the BCTF seeks to shut down the teachers' struggle. Indeed, the BCFED and other unions have tied their support for the BCTF to its call for binding arbitration.

From the outset, it has been clear that teachers' fight to reverse years of budget cuts and teacher layoffs and defend public education pits them against the government and the entire big business establishment, which in BC as across Canada and around the world is determined to wrest back all the rights working people won through the great social struggles of the last century.

But rather than mobilizing teachers and the working class for a political struggle against the Liberal government, the BCTF has spent the past thirteen weeks insisting that teachers' demands can be reconciled with its austerity agenda and rule.

The BCTF has coupled pleas to the government to name a mediator and now to impose binding arbitration with the

promotion of the capitalist courts as allies of teachers and working people because one BC Superior Court judge has twice issued rulings unfavourable to the government.

The courts, and especially Canada's Supreme Court, have in fact played a major role in the assault on the working class over the past three decades, repeatedly issuing rulings that uphold federal and provincial legislation criminalizing strikes and imposing real wage and benefit cuts.

In 2011, in a ruling upholding an Ontario law that makes it illegal for farmworkers to form a union, Canada's highest court ruled that the guarantee of a "right to association" contained in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms entails no constitutional right to bargain collectively or strike. Federal and provincial governments may choose to extend such rights under their respective labor codes, but the Charter's guarantee of "freedom of association" means merely that workers have the right to form an organization that periodically brings their grievances to the attention of management.

BC teachers have shown great determination and militancy in their fight to defend public education. But if their strike is not to be suppressed by the unions, it must be relaunched on a radically different basis—as a working-class political struggle. Teachers must make their strike and the defence of public education the spearhead of a cross-Canada, working-class industrial and political mobilization in defence of all public services, jobs and worker rights and aimed at bringing to power workers' governments committed to breaking the power of big business, so that social needs, not private profit, prevail.



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