

BC teachers union endorses austerity contract

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The British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF) is seeking to scuttle the militant strike the province's 41,000 teachers have mounted since mid-June and impose a six-year contract that entirely conforms to the provincial Liberal government's big business austerity agenda.

Early Tuesday morning, the BCTF leadership announced that after four days of intense negotiations it had reached an agreement in principle with the government.

Some important components of this agreement will only be made public after teachers vote on the proposed contract today. But enough are known to determine conclusively that the BCTF has abandoned teachers' key demands and signed on to an agreement that will do very little to reverse the impact of the Liberal government's assault on public education. This assault has resulted in well over \$3 billion in cumulative budget cuts and the elimination of more than four thousand teaching jobs over the past dozen years.

Under the proposed contract, British Columbia's (BC) teachers, who are among the lowest paid in Canada and haven't had a wage increase since 2010, would receive wages hike of 7.25 percent spread over six years or roughly 1.2 percent per annum. The first of these increases would be backdated to 2013, when the previous contract—a government legislated collective “agreement” that imposed a two-year wage freeze—expired.

The teachers have lost on the order of \$8,000-\$10,000 each during the strike, in part because the BCTF's strike fund was exhausted almost as soon as teachers walked off the job. Yet the BCTF abandoned the demand for a signing bonus allowing the government to make good on its punitive vow that any signing bonus—it had offered \$1,200—was conditional on teachers accepting the government's terms by the end of June.

On the core issues of class size and class composition limits and increased support for “special needs” students—issues that most directly impact on teachers' workload and the quality of education they can provide—the BCTF is claiming to have made “meaningful achievements.”

In reality, notwithstanding teachers' determined struggle and massive public support, the government has ceded very

little. BC's schools will remain chronically understaffed and underfunded, and BC will continue to spend less per capita on public education than most, if not all, provinces.

Moreover, the little the Liberal government has ceded it intends to take away. The contract that the BCTF is calling on teacher to ratify contains a clause empowering the government to reopen it if and when it prevails on the courts to overturn a lower court ruling that struck down its anti-teacher Bill 28 as unconstitutional. Adopted in 2002, Bill 28 eliminated provisions in teacher contracts governing class sizes and limits and gave the government the power to impose through regulation whatever limits, if any, would exist henceforth and in perpetuity.

The union has also agreed to set aside, irrespective of what the courts ultimately decide concerning the legality of Bill 28, all grievances resulting from it and a subsequent anti-teacher law, Bill 22, in exchange for a one-time payment of about \$105 million. Earlier the union had been demanding double this amount.

How this money, which works out to about \$2,500 per teacher, shall be divided among the teachers to compensate them for a dozen years of increased workload is to be at the discretion of the BCTF. However, as part of the tentative contract settlement, the union has agreed that some of the \$105 million will be used to help finance increased preparation time for elementary school teachers—another of the teachers' demands that the government failed to meet.

The agreement stipulates that the Liberal government will provide \$400 million over the next five years for “a learning improvement fund” that will be used to address class size and composition issues, especially through the hiring of additional specialist teachers. This is a \$100 million more than the government previously offered, but hardly begins to make up for the \$300 million per year the government cut from education spending through Bill 28.

A striking teacher who posted a blog calling on teachers to vote “No” to the proposed settlement noted that in an averaged-size school district the additional funding would be able to pay for only five to ten new teachers or about one for every five schools. “The primary reason that teachers decided to take job action, to go out on strike, to be on the

picket line as long as we have was to see significant and genuine gains for students in our classroom,” wrote Tara Ehrcke. “This is not the deal that will restore sanity to public education, and it is not a fair deal for teachers and students.”

Even the corporate media has noted that much of the additional money the government has pledged to invest in public education is coming from money saved by not paying teachers during their three-month strike.

The provincial Liberal government lost little time in crowing that the tentative agreement falls well within its “affordability zone”—i.e. the reactionary fiscal framework it has created through years of socials spending cuts and tax cuts for big business and the rich.

Speaking Tuesday afternoon, Premier Christy Clark lauded the six-year agreement as “historic” and boasted that it “works for taxpayers.” “We’re not going to have to raise taxes,” declared Clark. “We aren’t going into deficit and we’re not going to increase our debt.”

From the outset it was clear that teachers were facing a political struggle against a Liberal government that had repeatedly waged war on the teachers in pursuit of the ruling class agenda of making BC and Canada profitable for big business through the dismantling of public services and the gutting of workers’ rights.

But the BCTF was utterly opposed to making the teachers’ strike the catalyst for a working-class counter-offensive. It confined the teachers’ struggle within the straitjacket of collective bargaining, insisted that the defence of public education was entirely compatible with the government’s agenda, and spent the summer pleading for the Liberals to appoint a mediator, suggesting that this was all that stood in the way of a contract that meet the needs of teachers and students.

With the start of the 2014-15 school year earlier this month, there was a groundswell of support for the strike. Students and parents took to the picket lines and joined rallies in support of public education. The prospect that the strike could become a catalyst for a broader social movement became a cause of increasing concern in establishment circles, including the union officialdom and their allies in the social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP).

In early September the NDP called on the teachers to suspend their strike if the government agreed to mediation. The BCTF leadership soon ceded to the pressure from the BC Federation of Labour and the NDP and announced it was ready to end the strike without any of the teachers’ demands being met as long as the government agreed to submit most of the issues in dispute to binding arbitration.

The Liberals rejected this offer. While indicating that if the strike continued into October they would pass legislation

declaring it illegal, they repeatedly proclaimed that they wanted a “negotiated settlement.”

By this, as the government’s chief negotiator frankly stated, they meant that they wanted the union to accept the “responsibility” for imposing a contract on teachers that accorded with the government’s rightwing agenda, not teachers’ interests or students’ needs.

“In the past,” said Peter Cameron, “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.”

Ultimately the BCTF leadership gave the government just what it wanted—a sellout it can use to intimidate teachers and the working class a whole. Significantly, Clark at her Tuesday press conference specifically commended the union leadership for showing “real courage” in signing on to the government’s austerity agenda.

Over the past three decades, the unions and NDP have imposed concessions and job cuts and repeatedly suppressed militant workers’ struggles. BC’s Operation Solidarity, the mass movement against the Ontario Conservatives’ Common Sense Revolution, the strike wave that erupted against the Quebec Liberal government in late 2003, the 2004 BC Hospital Employees’ strike—the list goes on and on.

That the BCTF, considered to be one of the most “left” unions in BC and indeed anywhere in Canada, has come into such open conflict with the needs of teachers and the defence of public education only underscores that these pro-capitalist organizations are utterly incapable of defending the most elementary needs of the working class and that workers need a radically new perspective and new organizations of struggle.

BC teachers should reject the sellout tentative contract. They and their supporters should fight to make the teachers strike the catalyst for the mobilization of workers in BC and across Canada in an industrial and political offensive in defence of public services, jobs and worker rights and for the bringing to power of workers’ governments that will place the basic levers of the economy under public ownership so that the wealth produced by working people can be used to meet social needs, not enrich a tiny capitalist elite.



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