

# CLC president helped scuttle BC teachers' strike

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Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) President Hassan Yussuff played an important role in shutting down the three-month-long strike British Columbia's 41,000 public school teachers mounted in defence of public education.

According to recent reports in the *Globe and Mail*, Yussuff was instrumental in getting the BCTF leadership to resume bargaining with the government and accept a sell-out contract. This included flying to British Columbia to meet with British Columbia Liberal Premier Christy Clark's chief of staff, then arranging for a secret meeting between himself, Clark and B.C. Teachers' Federation President Jim Iker. At this second meeting, Yussuff and Iker assured BC's right-wing premier that they intended to challenge neither her government nor its austerity agenda.

The intervention of the newly elected president of the 3.3 million-member CLC to end the teachers' strike on the government's terms is yet another object lesson as to the unions' role in suppressing working-class opposition to the dismantling of public services and concession contracts.

It is highly unusual for the head of the CLC to become directly involved in labour disputes or discuss them with provincial premiers. That is usually seen as falling within the purview of the union involved and the respective provincial labour federation.

But Yussuff, the labour bureaucracy, and their allies in the social-democratic New Democratic Party became increasingly worried that the teachers' strike could trigger a broader working-class challenge to the BC Liberal government and its austerity program. At the start of the 2014-15 school year, there was a groundswell of support for the teachers. Although the unions did next to nothing to mobilize this support, students and parents flocked to picket lines and rallies

in defence of public education.

Less than four days after Yussuff and Iker met with Clark, the BCTF announced a deal to end the strike.

Teachers subsequently voted to accept it, but only—as even the corporate media was forced to concede—reluctantly.

While the BCTF has claimed that the new six-year contract contains appreciable gains for teachers, not a single one of their key demands was met.

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 union effectively imposed the government's directives. The deal provides for a paltry \$400 million in increased funding for education over the next five years—this when the government has siphoned off more than \$3 billion from the province's school system as the result of the \$300 million annual cut it made to the education budget in 2002.

As Victoria schoolteacher Tara Ehrcke noted, in an average-size school district the new contract will result in the hiring of five to 10 additional teachers or about one for every five schools. “The primary reason that teachers decided to take job action,” wrote Ehrcke, “...was to see significant and genuine gains for students in our classroom. This is not the deal that will restore sanity to public education, and it is not a fair deal for teachers and students.”

In addition, the new deal will result in a further erosion of teachers' wages. The negotiated wage hikes of 7.25 percent spread over six years—or roughly 1.2 percent per annum—is actually a pay cut when inflation is figured into the equation. The teachers, among the lowest paid in Canada, had not received a wage increase since 2010. Over the course of the strike, the

teachers—who did not receive any strike pay during the dispute—each lost on the order of \$8,000 to \$10,000 in wages.

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

The provincial Liberal government lost little time in crowing that the new contract falls well within its “affordability zone”—i.e. the reactionary fiscal framework it has created through years of social spending cuts and tax cuts for big business and the rich. The corporate media also praised the agreement, noting 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.

After the sell-out deal was pushed through, Iker and Yussuff explained to the *Globe and Mail* how the deal to end the strike was put together. Clearly, they saw their *Globe* interviews as a means of demonstrating the pivotal role unions play in suppressing the class struggle.

It was Jerry Dias, the head of Unifor (formerly the Canadian Auto Workers union), who, with a view to ending the teachers’ strike, first introduced the newly elected CLC president to Premier Clark when their paths all crossed in late August at a Prince Edward Island hotel.

Yussuff later explained that pivotal in gaining the Premier’s confidence was his spelling out to her that the BCTF and the unions as a whole were adamantly opposed to any challenge to her government and its “right to govern”—i.e. to impose the dictates of big business. As Yussuff told the *Globe*, “No matter how much disagreement you may have with somebody, you have to put those things aside and focus on the issue at hand. This was not, in my view, a political desire to somehow think we were going to defeat the government or cause them grief.”

Iker held similar views. “I don’t have any animosity with the Premier,” he said about the politician who is vilified by his membership as the central player in a vicious, decade-long attack on public education. “There have been issues with the relationship with this

government—I don’t know if you want to call it bad blood, maybe there is a difference in core values—but you have to work with government.”

The concern of Dias, Yussuff and Iker to prevent a confrontation with the government at all costs is instructive. The role of trade unions today is to act as the employers’ policemen and enforcers of capitalist austerity. Over the past three decades, the unions 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 2012 Quebec students’ strike—the list goes on and on.

From the outset of the strike in British Columbia, it was clear that teachers were facing a political struggle against a Liberal government that had repeatedly waged war on them 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 and the CLC were utterly opposed to making the teachers’ strike the catalyst for a working-class counteroffensive. Throughout the dispute, union officials confined the teachers’ struggle within the straitjacket of collective bargaining, insisted that the defense 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 met the needs of teachers and students. Then, when the government rejected their pleas for binding arbitration, they shut the strike down and imposed a sell-out agreement.

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