

Canada: Nova Scotia teachers on one-day strike against imposition of concessions contract

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Nine thousand three-hundred Nova Scotia public school teachers are staging a one-day strike today to protest the provincial Liberal government's imposition of a four-year concessions contract by legislative decree.

Premier Stephen McNeil and his Liberals expect to pass the legislation into law early next week. It will strip teachers of the legal right to strike until the expiry of the government-imposed contract in 2020 and criminalize the work-to-rule campaign they have been mounting since December 5.

Nova Scotia's elementary and high school teachers have been working without a contract for over a year.

The government's anti-teacher legislation comes in the wake of a third overwhelming rejection of a tentative contract. Teachers turned down the latest deal by 79 percent. All three (virtually identical) tentative contracts were recommended by the leadership of the Nova Scotia Teachers Union (NSTU).

So determined was the rank-and-file to reject the latest deal that union officials had brokered, the third contract rejection vote registered a record 100 percent turnout. Nevertheless, NSTU President Liette Doucet spurned calls she resign.

Instead, she called on the government to show some "patience and courtesy" so that the union could participate in the parliamentary process initiated by McNeil, that is the phony debate over the government's anti-teacher legislation. Subsequently, under mounting membership pressure to oppose the government and fearing further erosion of support for her leadership, Doucet and the NSTU leadership called a one-day work stoppage.

On the part of the union, this is manifestly an attempt to defuse opposition, not mobilize the working class in support of the teachers and public education.

The strike call comes in the wake of severe snowstorms

that have closed schools for three days this week and may result in a continued province-wide closure on Friday.

In announcing the tabling of the anti-teacher legislation, Liberal House Leader Michel Samson exposed the gulf existing between the militant membership and the union bureaucracy. "I think," said Samson, "Nova Scotians will look at the fact that we had three tentative agreements that the union executive accepted. They had the option to walk away from the table, to call a strike, refuse to recommend it to its membership. [They] didn't."

The contract to be forced upon the teachers is even worse than the last rejected tentative settlement, as it withdraws two days of paid leave previously agreed to by the government. Teachers are to receive a paltry 3 percent wage increase over four years, with the increases loaded onto the final two years of the deal. When inflation is factored in, this amounts to a wage cut. In addition long service payments have been frozen. The contract also sets up a de facto two-tier system for teachers as anyone hired after 2015 will no longer be eligible for a final retirement payout.

The government is adamant that the miserable contract be pushed through forthwith. Seven thousand provincial public sector workers and 24,000 health care workers have their contracts coming up for renewal later this year. McNeil has stated these workers, like the teachers, must make do with contracts that cut their real wages.

While wages are a key issue, teachers are also overwhelmed by the growing class sizes (up to 50 children per classroom) and the challenges posed by the integration of children with special needs in regular classes.

Premier McNeil has responded to the palpable evidence of a public school system mired in crisis because of cuts imposed by successive Progressive Conservative, NDP

and Liberal provincial governments by arrogantly denouncing the teachers' demands as way too expensive and "unrealistic".

After the teachers rejected the second union-endorsed tentative contract in October and then in December began a work-to-rule campaign, the government unilaterally closed all provincial public schools, maintaining that the job action threatened the safety of the students. It then moved to initiate legislation to impose a contract. But after an outcry from parents, the government backed down.

The McNeil government's decision not to impose back-to-work legislation came amidst warnings by the opposition parties and the union bureaucracy that such an anti-democratic move would unnecessarily exacerbate the situation. Instead, the Liberals put their faith in the union leadership to pull their coals from the fire by giving them a final chance to ram through a concessions deal.

The teachers' struggle has received an outpouring of popular support, with thousands of parents and ordinary citizens joining union-organized protests. Despite the fact that the work-to-rule action affects a series of extracurricular activities for students, thousands of high school students across the province have staged walkouts in support of their teachers.

The assault on school staff and public education by the McNeil government is part of a broader attack on the working class. All the parties in the provincial legislature—the Liberals, the Conservatives and the New Democratic Party—are dedicated to implementing the austerity program of the ruling class and determined to make workers pay for the growing economic crisis.

Canada's Atlantic provinces, which already have the highest poverty rates in the country, have been particularly hit by the 2014 oil price collapse and the subsequent reduction of off-shore oil industry activity. In addition to the loss of thousands of jobs in the oil and other resource industries, governments have imposed sweeping cuts to public services, while imposing a whole series of new taxes and user fees on working people, and "wage restraint" on public sector workers.

While it claims to oppose the Nova Scotia's government austerity measures, the union bureaucracy has fully collaborated with the current Liberal and the previous NDP government to divert popular anger into safe channels.

From the very beginning of the teachers' struggle, the NSTU did everything to prevent a confrontation with the government. Despite NSTU members voting 96 percent in

favour of strike action after having rejected for the second time a NSTU-supported deal last October, the union postponed any action, dragging its members through a long and phony process of negotiation/conciliation with government-appointed mediators.

Only when it was clear the government would not back down from its main demands did the NSTU call for an extremely limited work-to-rule campaign. But even then union leaders made sure it would not make a significant impact, reassuring the government and school boards that schools would run almost as usual.

Like the rest of the union bureaucracy, the NSTU leadership feared that any form of strike action could quickly become the catalyst of a far broader movement of the working class against capitalist austerity. Despite the determination of the McNeil government to impose massive concessions, the NSTU and the other unions continued to press the Liberals to "negotiate in good faith", remaining completely silent on the pending threat of an anti-strike law.

The pro-capitalist character of the NSTU and the Nova Scotia Government and General Employees Union, the province's largest public sector union, is demonstrated by their close relationship with the NDP.

The NDP, which in 2009 formed its first ever government in Nova Scotia, suffered a major defeat in the 2013 elections. After four years in office, during which it implemented major social spending cuts, reneged on a promise to ease restrictions on union organization drives, refused to introduce anti-scab legislation, and hiked various regressive taxes and electricity rates, the NDP was reduced to a third place rump in the legislature, winning just seven seats.



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