

Nova Scotia teachers vote massively in favour of “illegal” strike

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Nova Scotia’s 10,000 public school teachers have voted overwhelmingly in favour of strike action in response to the provincial Liberal government’s assault on public education.

Ninety-three percent of Nova Scotia Teachers Union (NSTU) members participated in Tuesday’s ballot on authorizing job action, with 82.5 percent voting in favour of a strike. The vote is all the more significant because under the Canadian province’s reactionary collective bargaining regime, any job action would be illegal, since the current contract, which was imposed by government fiat, only expires in mid-summer 2019.

In the event of a walkout, the NSTU could be fined up to \$10,000 per day, while individual teachers would be liable to penalties of up to \$1,000 per day.

The Liberals introduced the strike ban last year as part of a four-year concessionary contract, dating back to 2015, that they imposed by legislative decree.

The NSTU called the strike vote after the provincial Liberal government announced a sweeping “reform” of the public education system. Based on a report by consultant Avis Glaze, the “reform” would eliminate the province’s seven elected English-language school boards and replace them with a centralized body appointed by the government.

As Glaze outlined in her report, the elimination of the school boards is aimed at streamlining support services. “Non-core administrative roles,” Glaze declared, “should be reviewed as part of a shared services model to reduce administrative costs and create a more nimble, unified system.” Services that Glaze said could be centralized include: IT, payroll, finance, freedom of information and protection of privacy, and human resources.

Education Minister Zach Churchill has claimed no one will be laid off in the restructuring of the

province’s education system, but says jobs will be eliminated through attrition.

In a transparent attempt to scapegoat teachers for the education system’s problems, which are the result of chronic underfunding by successive governments of all political stripes, the report proposes the creation of a new province-wide licensing body for the teaching profession. Among other things, it will have the task of removing “weak teachers” from the classroom.

The Glaze report also called for the removal of 1,000 principals and vice-principals from the NSTU and their reassignment to a new professional organization. Through this change, the government intends to expand principals’ and vice-principals’ role as enforcers of government policy and pit them against teachers.

The union top brass has taken particular exception to this proposal as it would result in a substantial loss of dues income.

Stephen McNeil’s Liberal government came to power in Nova Scotia in 2013 by capitalizing on public anger over the right-wing, anti-working class record of the trade union-backed New Democratic Party (NDP) government of Darrel Dexter. During its four years in office, the Dexter NDP government slashed education and health care, ended a freeze on university tuition fee increases, and imposed regressive tax hikes.

Teachers have repeatedly sought to resist the Liberals’ attacks. They voted down three proposed contracts that had been endorsed by the NSTU leadership during collective bargaining in 2016 and 2017, the last by a majority of 74 percent.

After working for more than a year without a contract, teachers held a one-day strike in February 2017 and protested outside the provincial legislature against the impending imposition, by government fiat, of a contract that cuts their pay in real terms.

While militancy among teachers was strong, and they enjoyed significant public backing, the NSTU never had any intention of mobilizing teachers in struggle against the Liberal government. Instead, the NSTU leadership saw the one-day strike and protest as a means to let off steam after calls had been made by rank-and-file members for NSTU President Liette Doucet to resign. The NSTU wound up the protests against the government-decreed contract no sooner had the Liberals passed it into law.

This time around, teachers once again confront a union that is determined to reach a rotten compromise with McNeil and sell out the teachers' struggle. Doucet, while acknowledging that NSTU members gave her "a very strong strike mandate" and sent "a very powerful message," refused to set a date for any job action, let alone a province-wide strike.

Instead, Doucet issued a pathetic appeal to the government for talks, declaring, "Today, instead of announcing when job action will take place, the NSTU is inviting government to work with us. We are willing to do whatever it takes to protect the future of public education in Nova Scotia."

Doucet did not care to explain to the membership how it will be possible to "protect the future of public education in Nova Scotia" by collaborating with a government that has spent recent years cutting teachers' pay and undermining their collective bargaining rights, and is now planning to gut the basic structures of the province's public education system, so as to enhance its managerial power over teachers and ability to cut education budgets.

The government, while not refusing Doucet's offer of talks, has made clear that it intends to ram through its reform over the opposition of teachers and much of the public.

Rejecting the NSTU's call for a "pause" in implementing the Glaze report, Education Minister Churchill declared, "The fact is if change is going to happen, we need bold and decisive action to make it happen. Otherwise, the forces of the status quo most likely will prevail."

Teachers will accomplish nothing by appealing to the big business Liberal government or the NDP. Both parties have proven time and again that they are hostile to providing sufficient funding for public services, and decent-paying jobs for teachers and other public

employees, because that would require challenging the subordination of socio-economic life to big business' drive for profit.

Educators should instead turn to their colleagues across Canada, the United States and internationally and to the working class as a whole for support in the struggle to defend, enrich and expand public education.

A two-day strike by teachers in the US state of West Virginia began yesterday, the first such action in 28 years. Teachers there are protesting against a concessionary contract that includes below-inflation pay increases and hikes in health care costs. Teachers in Oklahoma, New Jersey and Pennsylvania have also begun preparations for strikes over similar issues.

A genuine fight to defend public education in Nova Scotia and elsewhere can only be conducted independently of the pro-capitalist trade unions. Teachers must break organizationally and politically with the NSTU, reject attempts to negotiate with the Liberals on how best to implement their pro-corporate agenda, and appeal instead for support from parents, students and workers.

If the strike mandate is to be fulfilled, teachers must establish action committees independent of the NSTU in schools and local neighbourhoods. These committees should make immediate preparations for the launching of a strike to force the Liberals to abandon their reform plans, win substantial across-the-board pay increases for all teachers, and secure increased funding to reduce class sizes.



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