

Nova Scotia Teachers Union abandons strike mandate, capitulates to Liberal attack on education

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3 March 2018

In a transparent capitulation to the provincial Liberal government's reactionary education "reform," the Nova Scotia Teachers Union (NSTU) has ruled out calling an illegal strike.

The announcement, made Thursday by NSTU President Liette Doucet, is a betrayal of the province's 9,600 teachers and the fight to defend public education. It comes just over a week after the overwhelming majority of teachers voted by an 82.5 percent majority to strike, and do so in the face of threats by Stephen McNeil's Liberal government to fine the union up to \$10,000 per day and each teacher up to \$1,000 per day of job action.

In spite of this vote and the strong public support teachers enjoy, Doucet coupled the release of the strike vote results with an announcement that the NSTU leadership was suspending any decision on strike action and calling on the government to hold talks. She subsequently met with Education Minister Zach Churchill and Premier McNeil to hammer out a rotten "compromise" behind the backs of the teachers.

Doucet is boasting that her talks have resulted in important changes to the government's education reform legislation, which was tabled by Churchill in the provincial legislature Thursday morning. A union press release spoke of "numerous compromises by the McNeil government," making the calling of a strike unnecessary. With evident relief, Doucet asserted, "A strike has been averted."

The NSTU's miserable climb down has nothing to do with defending the interests of teachers, but with protecting the privileges of the union bureaucracy.

One change the Liberals agreed to, which was presented in the corporate-controlled media as a major "concession," was to allow administrators, principals and vice-principals to remain affiliated with the NSTU, even

though they will become members of a new association. In practice, this means the NSTU bureaucracy will be able to continue to collect upwards of \$800,000 in dues per year, helping to pad the salaries of Doucet and her fellow union bureaucrats.

Meanwhile, the principals and administrative staff will be transformed into enforcers of government policy. Exposing the reactionary character of the change in their status, the approximately 1,000 teachers and senior staff who will be transferred to the new association will not have the right to unionize, take job action, or even file grievances.

The Liberals refused to retreat on any of the essential elements of their education "reform." The seven democratically-elected English-language school boards will be abolished and replaced by a centralized provincial advisory commission appointed by the government. This will give government more direct managerial control over the province's schools, and lead to the centralization of administration and other support services. Churchill has already declared that job losses will result—however, he claims they will be achieved through attrition as older workers retire.

The government's decision not to establish a central college of educators, which would have been responsible for assessing teachers and removing "weak teachers" from the classroom, came about because the NSTU has agreed to fulfil this function. CBC reported that the union has agreed to cooperate with the government in the drafting of "teaching and leadership standards," which will no doubt be used to scapegoat teachers for the problems confronted in the education system due to years of underfunding and neglect by successive governments.

Churchill made clear that he believes the union will serve as a willing partner in the big business Liberals'

assault on public education. “This is a great opportunity for us to enter into a new phase of our relationship,” he stated. “We’ve got to rebuild some trust.”

The legislation goes even further in restricting teachers’ ability to strike by increasing the penalties for illegal job action tenfold. This means the NSTU would be fined \$100,000 per day of illegal strike action. Neither Doucet nor any other union official remarked on this outrageous move, which was blandly portrayed as the expansion of existing anti-strike legislation already applying to other unions.

This is far from the first time that Nova Scotia teachers have experienced the treachery of the NSTU. In 2016 and 2017, teachers voted down three concessions-laden tentative agreements that had been recommended by the NSTU leadership. Then, when the Liberals moved to impose a concessionary contract by government decree, the NSTU called a token one-day strike and protest outside the legislature. However, no sooner did the Liberals pass their legislation imposing a four-year contract and a blanket ban on job action for its duration, than the union meekly submitted.

It was this systematic demobilization of the teachers that emboldened the government to press ahead with its education “reform.”

The Liberals’ right-wing agenda is in keeping with attacks on public education and other critical services by governments of all political stripes across Canada. Kathleen Wynne’s Ontario Liberal government imposed back-to-work legislation on striking teachers in 2012 to enforce a rotten concessions contract, while in British Columbia in 2014, Christie Clark’s Liberals relied on the connivance of the unions to shut down and sell out a provincial-wide teachers’ strike over growing class sizes and a lack of public funding. Liberal, Conservative and New Democratic Party governments alike have slashed government funding for education across the country over the past three decades.

The Nova Scotia Liberals’ attack on public education is part of a global ruling-class offensive targeting public services and the social rights working people wrested though the mass social and revolutionary struggles of the last century .

The McNeil Liberal government’s “Education Reform Act” is based on a report authored by Avis Glaze, a former Ontario education commissioner who has acted as an adviser to dozens of governments around the world pursuing education “reforms.” In Scotland, she serves as head of the regional government’s International Council

of Education Advisers. The ICEA meets twice annually to provide input on the government’s education “reforms,” which have included a 6 percent pay cut for teachers in real terms since 2005.

Teachers should reject with contempt the NSTU’s claim that the McNeil government’s legislation contains “concessions” to teachers’ demands. They should follow the example of their colleagues in West Virginia, who after being presented with a sell-out deal by the unions took matters into their own hands and are continuing their strike in defiance of the bureaucracy’s wishes. West Virginia teachers, who are among the lowest paid in the United States, are demanding substantial wage increases and additional funding for the state-run health insurance system to curb exorbitant health care costs.

Nova Scotia teachers should form their own independent action committees, which should immediately begin plans to fulfil the mandate given last week by educators for a strike against the Liberal government’s reactionary attack on public education. These committees should make the broadest appeal for support to students, parents and workers across the province, all of whom face similar attacks on their working conditions. A special appeal should be made to teachers across Canada and internationally to support their struggle.

Like their colleagues in West Virginia, who have rejected the bogus union claims of support for the teachers’ demands from Democratic Party politicians, Nova Scotia teachers should spurn Doucet’s efforts to portray the Liberals as willing to listen and respond to teachers’ concerns. The only way that public education can be defended and provided with the level of resources it requires is through the political mobilization of the working class in the fight for a socialist and internationalist program.

The author also recommends:

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[18 September 2014]



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