

British Columbia Teachers' Federation facilitates reckless reopening of schools that puts teachers and students' lives at risk

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British Columbia's New Democratic Party (NDP) government has enforced a reckless reopening of schools over the past two months that has resulted in a rapid spread of COVID-19. No less ruthlessly than the hard-right premiers Doug Ford in Ontario and Francois Legault in Quebec, BC Premier John Horgan has pursued a criminal policy of "reopening the economy" that places the profits of big business ahead of the protection of human life.

The NDP government and big business's disregard for the health and well being of teachers, students, and their relatives is provoking widespread opposition. Around 800 parents across the province plan to keep their kids at home from tomorrow to protest the province's inadequate protection measures. Tammy Loehndorf, a parent from Prince George who initiated the protest, told local media, "The idea of a safe school plan in theory was one thing, but the reality wasn't adding up. We actually have the power to pull our kids from that environment, to make a statement and to make parents feel connected with each other."

On Friday alone, four schools in Surrey, a Vancouver suburb, reported new COVID-19 infections. Since schools reopened after Labour Day, 400 children under the age of 10 have tested positive. Provincial authorities have acknowledged over 100 COVID-19 "exposures" in schools. However, parents and health experts have criticized the authorities' refusal to reveal how many infections are linked to each "exposure." In one outrageous case, the government refused to declare an outbreak at a West Vancouver school, where well over a dozen second graders were infected.

In response, Coralynn Gelh, a parent, wrote an open letter to B.C. Public Health and Vancouver Coastal Health, which has garnered over 900 signatures since October 6. According to the letter, within a week and a half, 9 out of 16 students in a grade 2 cluster at the school tested positive for the virus, along with 5 of their parents, 2 siblings, and 2 grandparents. Four of the confirmed cases were asymptomatic.

The irresponsible drive to get students back into unsafe

classrooms, consequences be damned, is part of the drive of the ruling class to force workers back to their jobs. The rapid reopening of schools is, from the vantage point of the commanding heights of society, necessary to ensure that children have a place to go while their parents are forced back into workplaces so that capitalists continue to make profits.

Under these extremely dangerous conditions, the pro-capitalist trade union apparatuses are playing the central role in preventing any organized opposition to the government's homicidal policies. The British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF) made clear early on that it had no intention of organizing any protest or job action. On the contrary, union officials held a series of meetings during August with representatives of the minority NDP, Green Party-backed government on how to implement the reopening of schools.

An internal poll conducted by the BCTF from September 17-21 found that 60 percent, or about 5,400 of the 9,000 teachers who responded, said that health and safety conditions in their schools were "completely inadequate" or "somewhat inadequate."

As opposition continued to grow after schools reopened, the BCTF, which represents 45,000 teachers, filed a grievance with the B.C. Labour Relations Board (BCLRB).

In a letter to members announcing the decision, BCTF President Teri Mooring wrote that the aim of the legal action was to "compel the government into a labour relations process to address our many outstanding concerns."

This is a sham. The reality is that the BCTF's manoeuvre was aimed at smothering calls for protests and strikes by giving the impression that it is fighting for the safety of teachers and students. Its filing with the pro-employer BCLRB—which is yet to determine whether it will even hear the case, let alone issue any binding recommendations—has done absolutely nothing to protect teachers. On the contrary, during the weeks and possibly months that will go by before

the Board reaches a decision, the BCTF expects its members to go to work every day in overcrowded classrooms with totally inadequate safety precautions, putting their own lives and those of their students at risk.

Labour relations boards across Canada invariably issue rulings upholding the interests of big business and capitalist governments. Earlier this month, the Ontario Labour Relations Board (OLRB) dismissed a virtually identical challenge to that being mounted by the BCTF from Ontario's four teacher unions.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* previously explained, the Ontario unions' case, filed in early September, allowed Doug Ford's Conservative government to create "facts on the ground" by reopening all schools in the face of widespread opposition. A month after all teachers and students had been herded back into the classrooms, the OLRB contemptuously declared it would not even hear the case citing a legal technicality raised by government lawyers. (See: **Ontario Labour Relations Board refuses to hear case brought by unions on unsafe school reopenings**)

In the two weeks since the OLRB tossed out the case, Ontario's education unions have said virtually nothing. No protests, no strikes, and no campaigns are being organized by these organizations because their loyalty is first and foremost to the capitalist state and its institutions, not the lives and well being of the workers they claim to represent.

Despite the BCTF's best efforts to suppress popular opposition, the organization of a protest by parents outside of its control is just the latest example of mounting anger to the back-to-school drive that has been gathering steam since the summer. A petition on Change.org calling for the return to school to be optional has received over 42,000 signatures. Last month, a group called Safe September BC staged a protest to demand mandatory masks, physical distancing, the provision of PPE, and distance learning options for those who need to stay out of school until the pandemic ends (See:

Opposition Grows to British Columbia NDP Government's Reckless School Reopening)

A major factor motivating this opposition is the utterly inadequate safety measures adopted by the NDP government. Responsibility for the "daily health screening check" has been foisted onto parents, rather than trained medical staff supplied by the government and school boards. Social cohorts are capped at 60 students for elementary and middle school and 120 students for secondary school, and students and staff are not required to observe physical distancing in their cohorts.

Overcrowded classrooms are also a problem. Data from the Ministry of Education estimates average class sizes to be 18 students for kindergarten; 19.9 for grades 1-3; 23.9 for

grades 4-7; and 22.1 for grades 8-12. During the 2018-19 school year, there were 812 classes with more than 30 students.

The number of schools in BC has declined by 200 since the 2000-01 school year. Class sizes, despite a brief dip in 2016-18 following a Supreme Court of Canada ruling, are rising again. The staff shortages at the root of this problem are the inevitable product of decades of austerity spending for education and other public and social services implemented by NDP and B.C. Liberal governments alike.

The current John Horgan-led NDP government came to power in 2017 after 16 years of a B.C. Liberal government. Horgan secured a majority in parliament thanks to the support of three Green Party MLAs on a right-wing platform of "fiscal responsibility" based on the financial framework laid down by his Liberal predecessors.

Horgan, who has served as a close ally of the "progressive" Trudeau federal Liberals as they increased military spending by 70 percent and imposed real-terms funding cuts on provincial health care transfers, was tacitly supported by the BCTF during the 2017 provincial election.

At the time, BCTF President Glen Hansman said, "We're asking British Columbians, especially teachers and parents, to vote for candidates who can be trusted to put B.C. kids and their education first." The end result of this pro-NDP electioneering is visible for all to see in the union's refusal to organize any opposition to the dangerous reopening of schools.

Safeguarding the lives of teachers, students, and their families cannot be left in the hands of the pro-capitalist unions and the government. It requires the independent political mobilization of teachers, students, and their supporters among other sections of working people through the establishment of rank-and-file safety committees in every school and neighbourhood. Already teachers in the US have formed such committees to take the conduct of the fight against the virus into their own hands. We strongly encourage those who agree with this program to contact us and join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee.



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