

Over 33,000 British Columbia government workers vote for strike action, as contracts for 400,000 public sector workers expire

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More than 33,000 government workers represented by the British Columbia General Employees Union (BCGEU) have voted 94.5 percent for strike action in their ongoing contract dispute with BC's New Democratic Party (BC NDP) government. The vote, held late last month, sends a clear and decisive message that provincial government administrative staff, liquor and cannabis store workers, correctional officers, and other public sector workers are determined to wage a struggle for inflation-busting wage increases, cost-of-living adjustments, and improved working conditions.

After more than two years of risking their health and safety so the economy could continue churning out profits for the ruling elite during the pandemic, workers face a direct confrontation with the NDP government, which is determined to impose massive real-terms wage cuts. Their legitimate demands will only be achieved in a rebellion against the BCGEU, which is one of the NDP's strongest union backers and is intent on turning the overwhelming strike vote into a rotten capitulation to the austerity policies of Premier John Horgan's government.

The BCGEU's response to the strike vote was to redouble its efforts to secure a deal with the government. Talks ultimately broke down Monday after the government refused to budge from its original offer of increases, depending on job category, of five to six percent over three years, under conditions in which annual inflation is running at over seven percent and workers have been subjected to decades of wage "restraint."

BCGEU negotiators have called for wage hikes of five percent per year wage in a two-year deal and cost-of-living adjustments should inflation exceed five percent per annum. The Public Service Agency, which bargains on behalf of the government, rejected this proposal out of hand. It refused to even make a counter-offer, insisting, according to the union, that its derisory offer was "take or leave it."

The government's stance is all the more egregious in light of the massive wage increases top public officials have been

granting themselves during the pandemic. In February, the provincial government announced that cabinet ministers, including Premier Horgan, who recently announced his retirement, had effectively authorized themselves a 10 percent pay raise.

BCGEU president Stephanie Smith, who was tweeting just days earlier of her admiration for Horgan's "dedication guiding our province for the last five years," declared of the breakdown in talks, "to say we are disappointed is an understatement." She stressed that the union did everything to "bridge the gap" between workers' demands and the government's offer, i.e., reach a rotten sellout that it could ram down the throats of its members to avoid a strike. Previously, Smith cynically presented the massive strike vote as a "tool" for the union in closed-door bargaining with the PSA.

The NDP government seemed less troubled by the breakdown of the talks, no doubt recognizing that what is in fact taking place around the "bargaining table" would more accurately be characterized as a conspiracy against rank-and-file workers between people who are in many cases members of the same pro-big business political party. "Bargaining is a dynamic process," stated a government press release, before stressing that "the parties are committed to reaching negotiated settlements that work for everyone at the bargaining table." In other words, it knows full well that the BCGEU leadership has no intention of waging a genuine struggle for wage and benefit improvements in opposition to the BC NDP's push for real-terms wage cuts.

For its part, the BCGEU confirmed its intention to prepare "strategic, targeted job action," which is code for isolated, regional strikes lasting a day or two that allow workers to let off steam while having as little impact as possible. No job action will be authorized by the union until "essential services" are agreed to with the government.

If BCGEU members are to succeed in their struggle, they

must act urgently to take control of it out of the union bureaucracy's hands by forming rank-and-file committees at every workplace to prepare for all-out strike action. What is required is the building of a mass political movement to challenge the austerity dictates of the NDP government.

Administrative workers, liquor store workers, and government employees must reach out to the approximately 350,000 other public sector workers across the province whose contracts have already expired or will in coming months, including teachers, nurses and health care workers. The 40,000-strong membership of the BC Teachers Federation saw their collective agreement expire June 30, while the BC Nurses Union has forced nurses to continue working for more than three months after their agreement expired March 31.

Across Canada, hundreds of thousands of workers are prepared to fight for wage increases to offset soaring inflation and to put an end to the dangerous conditions they have suffered during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic due to the ruling elite's "let it rip" policy.

In Ontario, 250,000 teachers and education support staff are on a collision course with the hard-right Progressive Conservative government, which is intent on imposing contracts enshrining real wage cuts and billions of dollars' worth of spending cuts. Conditions thus exist for a joint offensive of Ontario and BC teachers to secure decent terms of employment and defend public education. But for this to take place, workers in these provinces and across Canada must establish a network of rank-and-file committees to coordinate the mass mobilization of the working class in a political struggle against capitalist austerity.

The upsurge in worker militancy in British Columbia mirrors similar trends both nationally and internationally. The past year has seen significant strikes in the New Brunswick public sector, strikes by various groups of railway workers and a series of walkouts by Ontario construction workers. Europe is currently witnessing its largest upsurge of labour action in decades, with general strikes rocking Belgium and Greece, and a major strike by rail workers in Britain. In the United States, nurses, manufacturing workers and auto parts workers have launched strikes for pay increases amid unprecedented levels of inflation.

The attempt to impose yet another round of austerity on public sector workers is part of a decades-long, ever-expanding assault by Canadian big business and its political hirelings on the living standards of the working class. Having already forced workers to foot the bill for hundreds of billions of dollars in tax cuts for big business and the rich and for military rearmament and the waging of imperialist wars in alliance with Washington, the ruling class is now

demanding that workers accept further rollbacks to cover the cost of the massive bailouts given to the banks and big business at the beginning of the pandemic, as well as the US-NATO war with Russia.

In both their federal and provincial iterations, the NDP is playing a key role in the ruling class's onslaught on working people. Through their confidence-and-supply agreement with Justin Trudeau's pro-austerity, pro-war federal Liberal government, the NDP has effectively given a blank cheque to the expansion of Canada's military and the escalation of the US-NATO war with Russia over Ukraine.

In BC, the provincial NDP government has presided over a vicious profits-before-lives pandemic policy that has killed almost 4,000 people, according to official statistics, and likely thousands more. Throughout the pandemic the province has consistently posted excess deaths higher than the national average, according to the highly respected University of Toronto-affiliated Moriarty Lab.

The BCGEU and the rest of the union bureaucracy have been a key pillar of the NDP's pandemic policy, which has resulted in six waves of mass infection and death. They have enforced the NDP's drive to keep in-person schooling and nonessential businesses, especially resource industries and manufacturing, open throughout the pandemic, and opposed any and all collective job action against unsafe working conditions on the grounds it is "illegal."

Ever since the NDP came to power in 2017, it has enforced ruthless austerity measures in the interests of big business. During the 2017 election campaign, Horgan boasted that all his promises were based on the fiscal framework laid down by the outgoing Liberal government, which was widely despised after 15 years of eviscerating budgets for health care and education, and for its privatization and deregulation drive.

During its first three years in power, the NDP was propped up by the Green Party, which repeatedly attacked the NDP from the right for its "lavish" spending pledges. Recently Green leader Sonia Furstenau has cynically sought to give the Greens a makeover as a "left" alternative to the NDP. In response to the BCGEU strike vote, she tweeted her concern about the impact on workers of the rising cost of living.



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