

British Columbia Teachers' Federation seeks to impose massive wage cuts on 49,000 educators

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The author of this article is a teacher in British Columbia and a member of the Cross-Canada Educators' Rank-and-file Safety Committee, which was formed in 2021 to fight the ruling elite's disastrous profits-before-life pandemic policy. We encourage all education workers and workers throughout the public sector ready to fight the BC unions' betrayal of their contract struggles to contact cersc.csppb@gmail.com or fill out the form at the end of this page.

The British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF), which represents 49,000 educators, is in the process of ramming through a rotten sellout agreement on its members that contains massive real-terms wage cuts and maintains overwhelming workloads. The deal mirrors agreements concluded with the New Democratic Party (NDP) provincial government by almost all major public sector unions, including the Canadian Union of Public Employees BC (CUPE), the Healthcare Employees Union (HEU), and British Columbia General Employees Union (BCGEU).

With an official provincial inflation rate at 7.7 percent, and prices for food and other basic necessities rising even faster, the three-year contract calls for meagre raises of 3.24 percent in the first, between 5.5 and 6 percent depending on inflation in the second, and between 2 and 3 percent in the final year.

BC's trade union bureaucracies have engaged in a perfidious, coordinated attempt to force austerity and continued unsafe working conditions onto almost 400,000 public sector workers ever since collective agreements began expiring in the spring. At every point, the goal of the BCGEU, BCTF, CUPE and others was to prevent a unified struggle by all workers against the bureaucrats' friends, and often party colleagues, in the pro-austerity, pro-corporate NDP government.

The BCGEU played a key role in this operation. Despite receiving an overwhelming mandate to strike from its 30,000

members of 95 percent, the leadership insisted throughout their dispute that a negotiated settlement was their only interest. In effect, their paramount concern was the preservation of the collective bargaining framework, a process that preserves their own material privileges and gives them the right to negotiate sellouts for their members.

When the BCGEU leadership finally was compelled to call a strike at government-owned liquor and cannabis stores, the leadership called strikes at only 4 different locations throughout the entire province for two weeks. They then arbitrarily called off the strike without consulting the membership, returned to the negotiating table, and announced within days their acceptance of the wage-cutting deal that is now serving as the benchmark for enforcing "wage restraint" on hundreds of thousands of workers. Underscoring the widespread disgust felt by rank-and-file BCGEU members, the contract only passed with 52 percent support on a turnout of 70 percent. In other words, only a little over one-third of the union's membership backed it.

Even before the rotten sellout was reluctantly ratified by the BCGEU membership, the other public sector unions rushed to announce their acceptance of the same deal. The BCTF was first among them, announcing immediately after the BCGEU released its agreement that they would halt all wage negotiations forthwith. Despite bluster from the BCTF leadership about its ongoing determination to fight for reduced class sizes and staffing ratios, the government made no concessions on these points. The bureaucracy was left to tout a miserable 10-minute increase in prep time per week and some vaguely worded improvements to mental health support as the reasons for calling the contract a victory.

The behavior of the other provincial union leaders during this time has bordered on farcical. Not once did they do anything that would materially aid the BCGEU struggle. There was not a single call for solidarity strikes from any of them, nor were they asked for by the BCGEU leadership. Instead, they resorted to lip service platitudes and

empty gestures.

The reality is that to refer to what took place in BC as “negotiations” is to abuse the English language. The talks were between government and union officials who almost all carry an NDP membership card. These were conspiratorial consultations between friends and political allies on how best to ram another round of concessions down the throats of the workers, many of whom have risked their health and very lives on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic for almost three years.

The trade unions have served as a key prop for the NDP government since it returned to power after 15 years of BC Liberal rule in 2017. One of Premier John Horgan’s first promises, which he kept to the letter, was to maintain the fiscal framework of public spending austerity laid down by his right-wing predecessors. After relying initially on support from the Greens for his minority NDP government, Horgan secured a majority in an early election held in the fall of 2020 with fulsome support from big business, including a ringing endorsement from the *Globe and Mail*, the mouthpiece of the Bay Street financial elite.

Bureaucrats from virtually all of the public sector unions currently engaged in selling out their members’ wage demands hold high-level positions within the governing NDP. BCGEU president Stephanie Smith sits on the provincial BC NDP 44 member executive, as does HEU president Barb Nederpel. Former BCTF president Jinny Simms currently sits in the provincial legislature as an NDP deputy.

The BCTF leadership has launched a full-court press to have the agreement ratified in votes scheduled for November 16-18. They are insultingly attempting to sell the deal as a wage increase, ignoring all previous talk of securing COLA to offset the spiraling cost of inflation faced by teachers.

Unsurprisingly, none of the public sector unions sought to negotiate greater workplace safety protections during bargaining, despite the fact that the pandemic continues to rage in schools. The main pediatric hospital in the province, BC Children’s Hospital, recently activated their emergency protocols to deal with the overwhelming influx of patients.

Throughout the entire pandemic, the BCTF and other public sector unions have loyally collaborated with their NDP partners to impose a policy of mass infection and death. Union leaderships bitterly resisted all attempts by workers to fight collectively against dangerous working conditions produced by the airborne virus in confined classrooms and were instrumental in imposing Premier John Horgan’s criminal back-to-work/back-to-school drive.

The contract that is currently in front of teachers offers a stark choice: we can accept years of continued unsafe workplaces and austerity wages or reject this offer and signal

to the leadership that there is opposition to this contract from the rank-and-file who are over-worked, stressed out and leaving the profession in droves. Teachers should be clear, however, that voting down this deal can only be the first step. The union leadership is organically hostile to our interests and will continue its efforts to impose concessions on us regardless of how we vote. Their main concern is to preserve the collective bargaining framework, which is the basis of their close partnership with the NDP government and the state.

Teachers and all public sector workers in BC must therefore begin forming rank-and-file committees in every school and workplace throughout the province to help mobilize all workers against this wretched contract. Only when teachers are organized independently of the trade union bureaucracies and mainstream political parties will they be able to campaign for the rejection of all wage-cutting contracts, and organize strike action across the province and nationwide to fight for fair wage increases and safe working conditions.

BC teachers and their supporters should learn the political lessons of the recent powerful strike by 55,000 school support staff in Ontario, which forced the deeply unpopular Ford government to withdraw a draconian anti-strike law. The caretakers, education assistants, early childhood educators, and administrative staff secured immense popular support for their struggle, which was building towards a general strike that could have forced Ford from office and won inflation-busting pay increases for the low-paid workers. Instead, leaders of CUPE, Unifor, and other major unions rushed to Ford’s rescue and shut down the strike without consulting the membership. CUPE is now back at the bargaining table with Ford, where they are cooking up a sellout agreement that will seek to impose real-terms pay cuts on the school support staff.

The strangling of the Ontario education workers’ strike by the union leaders underscores that teachers in BC and workers everywhere seeking to put an end to decades of “wage restraint” and other concessions must take matters into their own hands and organize a network of rank-and-file committees to seize control of their fight from the union bureaucrats.



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