

British Columbia's NDP government imposes concessions contract on Vancouver transit workers by appointing "special mediator"

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The union-backed New Democratic Party government of British Columbia succeeded in shutting down a strike by Vancouver transit supervisor workers and imposing a concessions-laden contract this week by appointing a "special mediator."

The new three-year contract with Coast Mountain Bus Company (CMBC), a subsidiary of the province's transit authority TransLink, was ratified by the membership of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 4500 on Tuesday.

This rotten deal, struck behind the workers' backs by the province and union, will not come close to the strikers' key demands. This was underscored by CUPE's decision to suppress any details about the agreement rushed through the ratification vote. Last year, Unifor agreed to a three-year deal for some 5,000 bus drivers containing a mere 12.5 percent wage "increase," which barely keeps pace with inflation.

After years of effective wage cuts and worsening working conditions, the transit supervisors were demanding wage increases of 20 percent and 25 percent over the next three years and the redress of their "unmanageable" workloads due to chronic understaffing.

Although their wage demands would amount to less than .05 percent of the regional transit authority's annual salary budget, CMBC dismissed them outright as "unreasonable" and counter-offered with a meagre 13.5 percent over three years in one of Canada's most expensive cities. Along with other transit employers, CMBC is demanding that transit be deemed an "essential service" to effectively criminalize strike action.

TransLink CEO Kevin Quinn made clear that what is at stake in the dispute is not just the salaries of a few supervisors, but the precedent it would set for the company's thousands of employees whose contracts are due to expire in the next few years. Meeting the 25 percent pay hike, he explained to the website Urbanized, would incur a total 10-year cost of \$250 million based on "the ripple effect of the union's demands on other future contracts."

The latest stage of the struggle began in early December, when the 180 transit supervisors voted unanimously to strike

after working for almost a year without a contract. When mediation broke down in late January, growing pressure from the rank and file obliged CUPE 4500 to mount a brief two-day strike beginning January 22. Solidarity action was taken by an additional 11,000 transit operators and support workers, shutting down much of the bus and SeaBus ferry networks in Metro Vancouver.

The NDP provincial government was working behind the scenes to ensure that no further strike action took place. On January 24, Minister of Labour Harry Bains appointed pro-employer "special mediator" Vince Ready to organize a sellout. Just over a week later, CUPE accepted Ready's proposed "settlement" and rushed it to the membership for immediate ratification.

Bains praised Ready for his "long-standing record" of settling labour disputes as "a highly regarded mediator in the labour relations community." This refers to his decades-long career in defusing contract disputes and settling them on the employers' terms. In 2020 he was called on to intervene in a bitter oil refinery lockout in Saskatchewan in which FCL management employed a large scab workforce with the backing of the right-wing Saskatchewan government and its courts and police force. Ready's proposed "settlement," which included a long list of sweeping concessions on pensions, jobs and working conditions, was initially rejected by the striking workers before it was rammed through.

In 2005, Ready was called upon as "facilitator" by then-Premier Gordon Campbell and his provincial Liberal government to crush a two-week "illegal" strike by teachers waged in defiance of a government-imposed contract. The defeat of the teachers was critical to the disarming of the general wave of working class opposition to the Liberals' sweeping austerity policies, which repeatedly provoked large-scale public protests.

At every stage in the supervisors' struggle, CUPE Local 4500 did all it could to delay, minimize and isolate the strike while it waited for the NDP's inevitable intervention. In early December, after the strike vote, CUPE 4500 president Chris Gindhu announced that his union was "working hard" to avoid

strike action, while refusing to release the vote outcome publicly for weeks. His union did nothing to unite the struggle with the 70 transit workers on neighbouring Vancouver Island who had walked off the job on December 15 over wages, benefits, and working conditions.

Job action was not announced by CUPE 4500 until January 6, almost one month after the strike vote, which initially took the form of an ineffectual overtime ban. It was not until January 22—when it was clear that the dismal offer made by CMBC would be rejected by the membership—that CUPE 4500 grudgingly called for a strike, restricted to just 48 hours, while it continued to plead with CMBC for a deal.

CUPE 4500 directed its appeals to the province's Labour Relations Board (LRB) to keep workers constrained by the "collective bargaining" legal framework just as their strike was gaining momentum. On the day the 48-hour strike began, CUPE 4500 filed with the LRB against CMBC's use of scab labour and requested permission to expand the strike to include picketing at Vancouver's SkyTrain operations, North America's fourth-largest rapid transit system. As was to be expected, LRB vice chair Rene-John Nicolas ruled that the employer's actions were "understandable in the circumstances." He denied not only CUPE 4500's request for damages but also the initiation of a special investigation.

Having agreed to mediation by Ready, CUPE felt it could afford a bit of posturing by calling for an "escalation" of the strike set to begin the following Saturday that even then would last only 72 hours. The union bureaucrats were clearly confident that Ready would intervene before this strike "escalation" went ahead.

Ready's anti-worker record did not stop CUPE 4500 from showering him with praise, with servicing representative Liam O'Neill thanking Ready "for his thorough and comprehensive review of the issues at the heart of this dispute." Admitting the union's slavish capitulation to the employer's demands through political pressure from the NDP, he added, "While they don't completely address our issues, these recommendations are clearly our best path towards a mutually acceptable settlement." The rotten contract was then foisted onto the membership who had but a few days to read through it before being forced to cast their vote.

In the brief press release confirming ratification of the agreement, Local 4500 president Gindhu effusively praised Ready for his help in achieving a "fair compromise that serves both the Company and workers" and for "his efforts and invaluable guidance."

The history of TransLink underscores its long record of attacking the conditions of its workforce. In 2001, during the longest transit strike in British Columbia's history, TransLink divided its operations into different subsidiaries, which included the Coast Mountain Bus Company, in order to lower workers' wages, keep each contract struggle isolated, and SkyTrain operational. This piecing out allowed TransLink to

drag out the strike for 123 days until a concessions contract was accepted.

A significant number of strikes took place last year in British Columbia—including the two-week port strike that ended when the Liberal Trudeau government successfully prevailed on the International Longshore and Warehouse Union to impose a rotten, government-dictated contract on the workers. According to Statistics Canada data, 2 million "person days" were lost to work stoppages last year, the highest number in more than a decade.

The BC NDP strategy of appointing a supposedly impartial "mediator" to crush strike action demonstrates once again the key role it plays for the ruling elite in suppressing working class struggles. Along with all provincial governments and the federal Liberal government, the BC NDP government is actively covering up the deadly winter surge of the COVID-19 pandemic, which continues to circulate around the globe, evolving new and potentially more lethal variants. Since taking power in 2017, the provincial NDP has presided over the mushrooming housing and homeless crisis, a staggering opioid epidemic, and a collapsing public healthcare system.

Speaking to a group of right-wing Jewish officials on a podcast last week, BC NDP cabinet minister Selina Robinson blithely proclaimed that the area the state of Israel was founded on through the brutal displacement and murder of the Palestinians was previously "a crappy piece of land with nothing on it." This outburst revealed the pro-war, pro-austerity essence of the NDP, which at the federal level props up the Trudeau Liberals even as they fully endorse Israel's genocide against the Palestinians.

The struggle by transit workers is not over and the critical issues raised by their contract fight remain unresolved. But to take their struggle forward requires the organization of rank and file workers' committees independent of and in opposition to the pro-war and austerity political establishment and above all the union bureaucracy, which is fully integrated in a tripartite alliance with the ever-more exploitative corporations and the state.

Transit workers in BC must unify their struggle with the workers in transit and other industries across Canada, the US, and beyond. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees gives concrete expression and political leadership to this growing movement.

Most fundamentally, the transit workers' struggle must be fused with the mass protest movement against the genocide in Gaza in a worker-led international counteroffensive against war and exploitation, and its root cause, the capitalist system.



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