

Approaching the End of Public Education: The Sequel

by Stephen Elliott-Buckley - Friday, October 07, 2005

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Unions--especially public sector unions--are a diarrhea stain for advocates of neoliberal globalization efforts to maximize free markets, minimize government social programs and spending, and commodify the commons.

Unions posit that human beings--after a century and a half of human rights advances--deserve basic rights such as the right to collectively organize into unions to negotiate wages and working conditions...which are symbiotically learning conditions for students in the education "industry".

Unions are dangerous threats to "global competitiveness" and the race to the bottom of wages, social legislation and regulatory efforts to protect people, culture and the environment.

Not surprisingly, 24hrs.ca "Right On" columnist Erin Airton yesterday blamed the union for teachers' troubles in [a piece you can read on her blog](#).

A small, but significant minority of BCTF members resent belonging to the union. I wrote about them [earlier this week](#).

Erin Airton's thesis is that the union is the teachers' worst enemy. In secret ballot votes in recent days and weeks, the following happened:

88.4% of BCTF members voted in favour of striking.

90.5% voted to go on strike today.

Further, [from a BCTF report](#):

"A [BCTF] membership poll conducted in June of 2005 sent a clear message:

- * A total of 98% said that it's important to have a collective agreement that protects learning conditions like class size and the integration of students with special needs.
- * A total of 96% said that it's important to have bargaining rights restored.
- * A total of 90% said that it's important to negotiate a salary increase."

Erin Airton's article is extraordinarily accurate for up to 11.6% of BCTF members, plus perhaps some more who held their nose while voting with--it turns out--a whopping majority to embark on an "illegal" strike defined "illegal" by a government that has little respect for the rule of law, the Canadian Constitution or our nation's commitments to ILO rulings.

BCPSEA was designed to create deadlock with teachers. It has been extraordinarily successful at that

since 1993. The solution for a broken bargaining system, to the Campbell neoLiberal government is to do away with bargaining by legislating some sort of Frankencontract and expect teachers to shut up, pay the bully all their lunch money and take their whipping: as [Shirley Bond says](#), "We're certainly hopeful that teachers will respect the position that they find themselves in." It is hard to get more demeaning and dismissive.

Erin Airton writes, "binding arbitration was an alternative way to ensure kids aren't held hostage every time the BCTF cranks up their contract bargaining process."

As I wrote the other day, rhetoric matters. "Hostage" suggests terrorizing kidnapers. That would be the teachers.

Erin Airton also writes, "job action like this does nothing to endear parents to the teacher union's cause. The BCTF has struck out in the public relations battle this time around and there is a really simple reason for it.

"Teachers allowed their union, the BCTF, to become so politicized during the last provincial election that it lost the credibility it needed to win the fight for the hearts and minds of parents."

The other day I wrote that the public supports the teachers to a virtually absolute degree: up until their actions inconvenience parents' perceived right to state-structured babysitting. Campbell's junta (oh, there's that rhetoric again) pushes parents' inconvenience buttons quite well.

She also writes, "One starts to wonder with whom the problem lays if the BCTF couldn't come to agreement with either government--friend or foe."

Since the BCPSEA is designed to be a massive impotent red herring, her bad-union solution isn't the only explanation.

Then come the hugs: "The teachers who work hard with our kids day in and day out, guiding them academically and socially, are not being well-served by their union. Every single teacher that my daughter has had in the past four years has been kind, hard-working and has gone way above and beyond the letter of the collective agreement. In other words, they've been true professionals."

And as I suggested above, those teachers not being well-served by the union may be described as less than 11.6% of the membership. Perhaps I'm to conclude that the 11.6% are the true professionals being victimized by the pesky uppity BCTF executive.

And after the hugs, comes the call to disband the union that has been ringing since 1988: "Perhaps teachers in BC might want to start to look at other ways of organizing themselves. At some point, you'd think they'd get pretty tired of a union that isn't serving their needs and that continually reduces their profession's credibility with parents, students and the general public."

Overall a well-crafted piece of communications. Making sure the public continues to drink the neoLiberal Kool-Aid is a key element in the privatization of public education and the rest of the commons.

So now is the part where media/government convergence becomes a fun game. Let's play! If Erin Airton is a [former Gordon Campbell staffer](#), and her columns run in 24hrs.ca, and billionaire Jim Pattison owns the paper, and former BC NDP Premier Glen Clark (who created the BCPSEA) is its president, it is no surprise that Erin Airton seems to feel the BCTF union is a diarrhea stain worth sanitizing.