

## BC's Public Education: Another Step Closer to the End

by Stephen Elliott-Buckley - Wednesday, October 05, 2005

<http://politicsrespun.org/2005/10/bcs-public-education-another-step-closer-to-the-end/>

In an article (illegally copied below) that is remarkably free of inflamed rhetoric, *The Province* has presented some interesting issues in the news that the Campbell neoLiberal government has--in typical Orwellian fashion--legislated a "contract" for teachers with *Bill 12: The Teachers' Collective Agreement Act*, which is neither collective, nor an agreement.

I've already written [once](#) or [twice](#) or maybe [three](#) times about what passes for an "agreement" or "contract" in our neoliberal world. BCTF President Jinny Sims sums up the core idea nicely:

*"What they're saying is teachers in this province have no rights. We might as well be in servitude.*

'This government has an agenda, and we believe their agenda is to silence the teachers' voices so they can privatize public education.'

In a [press release](#), she added:

*"What does that say about the Campbell Liberals' respect for teachers or for the rule of law?" Sims asked.*

"She urged British Columbians to remember that the United Nations International Labour Organization has urged the Liberals to comply with international law by repealing the essential service law for education, but they have ignored that ruling.

"When we win in the courts, they simply legislate the outcome that the courts have disallowed," Sims said. Now, when teachers try to assert the rights still open to us with a very limited job action, the government will not even allow that process to unfold.'

"Sims questioned the message that the government is sending with yet another imposed contract."

In typical neoliberal fashion all around OECD countries, public goods and services are being marketized with a combination of corporate style management for areas that should be revenue neutral (health care, education) and outright privatization--including 999 year leases--and contracting out (BC Ferries, BC Rail, BC Hydro, HEU).

Just like w.Caesar is doing in the USA with the Iraqi invasion and occupation money pit, when Campbell was first elected he inherited a surplus budget from the NDP. He then delivered a massive tax cut to the rich, leading to a huge deficit: justification for the "tough choices" he had to make in reducing spending, the size of government and its capacity to effectively deliver social programs, thereby fueling privatization options.

Today even, in w.Caesar land, the president said they'd have to cut social spending to pay for hurricane relief. Oddly, he also said that the private sector will be the engine of recovery. That vague private sector has elevated the rent for inhabitable homes in the Gulf region to ridiculously high levels. Additionally, FEMA paid more than twice the weekly cruise rate to rent 3 Carnival cruise ships to temporarily house hurricane refugees: aaaah, the private sector at work! But I digress.

In this mix is an attempt--so far working quite well--to roll back 150 years of advances in workers (human) rights through the validity of private and public sector unions and workers rights legislation, currently being gutted in BC.

One way to do this is to demonize teachers. On CBC radio this morning, Mike de Jong said Bill 12 was designed to protect children, thereby framing teachers as predatory threats on the innocent, defenseless children of the province.

*"The Liberals are also appointing an industrial inquiry commission to develop a new bargaining process to deal with what Labour Minister Mike de Jong describes as a 'broken bargaining system.'*

"Rick Connolly, de Jong's associate deputy minister, said there was no possibility of a negotiated settlement because the teachers and the B.C. Public School Employers Association [BCPSEA] are too far apart."

The broken bargaining system began in the 1990s under the NDP when they introduced provincial bargaining and stopped individual school boards in school districts from negotiating contracts with local groups of teachers. The BCPSEA was created to bargain on behalf of all school boards and the BCTF became the provincial bargaining agent for teachers.

The BCPSEA was designed, I believe, as a buffer so that the teachers would not negotiate directly with the government. Perhaps this was to keep it from appearing to the public that the typically teacher-friendly NDP was giving sweetheart deals to their supporters. More likely, however, is that as the NDP tried to govern from a social democrat philosophy in a neoliberalizing world, they were caught up in the need to maintain BC's bond rating on international markets and like many centre or left governing parties in OECD countries in the neoliberal post-Cold War world, they managed their fiscal affairs like conservatives. They also legislated workers back to work, thereby finally ending what was fast becoming a pretense of social democracy.

For teachers, this meant corporatized management structures and cost cutting under the guise of "accountability" in some profit generating context grafted onto an education system designed to be an investment in the intangible creation of an enlightened next generation.

It also meant that the NDP needed a buffer to put some restraint on teacher demands: the BCPSEA. Not surprisingly, the BCPSEA has never completed a negotiated contract with teachers. ALWAYS, the government of the day had to step in to legislate a settlement. This is not surprising because BCPSEA is inherently an impotent body. School boards get funding from the Ministry of Education. Boards have elected members but no taxation authority. Ultimately, in representing boards' goals, BCPSEA is not empowered to negotiate anything that won't be funded by the Ministry. Thus the charade of authentic negotiation has persisted since the 1990s.

Then we are graced by god with new neoLiberal premier Campbell who more heinously empowers the BCPSEA to sit on its hands and not bargain in good faith at all. Why should they when they can put whatever the government wants them to put on the table--no matter how far off it is from the teachers' standpoint--knowing full well the government will legislate that into reality and to rub salt into the wounds of democracy, call it a "collective" "agreement" "contract".

So de Jong is right in saying the process is broken. It was broken even before the Campbell neoLiberal government came along. His solution, however, is another incremental step in removing a century and a half of worker won rights: collective bargaining and the right to strike.

And Connolly is obviously right in saying the two sides are too far apart. They are DESIGNED to always be too far apart.

*"Parents picking up their children at Lord Roberts Elementary in Vancouver's West End were generally supportive of teachers, but concerned about the impact of a strike."*

But what about the public. Polling by teachers and media groups consistently ranks teachers as having more public trust than just about everyone in the world. Parents support teacher wage increases, class size reductions, more funding for supplies and texts and field trips, and no service charges for courses at school (which is unconstitutional anyway, but that's another story).

However, the neoLiberals know very well that as much as the public values teachers and the work they do, that support ends when the free babysitting stops. It's harsh to recognize this conclusion, but before Campbell, the NDP knew that parents wouldn't stand for scrambling to find child care if teachers strike; parents would blame the NDP for that. Campbell even moreso rejects human beings' right to strike, including or especially teachers.

The public is wonderful to have on the teachers' side, but that support ends when it inconveniences parents:

*"[The imposed contract] is still better than the teachers and students being out of school. I think the teachers should get what they want, but at the same time our children need to be in school."*

This means that teachers should get what they want UNLESS it means children being out of school. Sadly, the public is unaware that during any kind of strike action the Labour Relations Board will insist that a sufficient number of teachers be in schools to supervise students whose parents can't find child care.

The public will ultimately leave teachers to swing by a knotted rope from a tree branch, in part because our society is being indoctrinated by corporatist neoliberal media to believe that workers don't deserve rights and a \$6 training wage is vitally necessary in our society.

Teacher morale is very low now. Teachers are split on school staffs: some wanting to fight injustice and push government to fund schools properly and provide working conditions and competitive salaries to retain good teachers, some don't want to "stir up trouble" and some (scarily) think it's simply wrong to disagree with authority.

Many other teachers are afraid of the government. Many agree with the government, which paradoxically means that they deserve to work for less money, larger class sizes, more special needs students in class without aides, fewer supplies and more course fees. Though truly, some of those teachers feel that in a more merit-based privatized education system they could make more money than they are now because they are such good teachers (or at least they know they have the right political, anti-union, anti-communitarian beliefs).

Others don't want to or can't lose a day's pay, or a week's pay, or 50 days' pay like CBC workers, or several month's pay, even though teachers have a large strike fund and are affiliated with the BC Federation of Labour.

All of this is a nearly perfect recipe for Campbell's neoLiberal gouging and privatization agenda. The public supports teachers ideologically but not economically to fund the system through sufficient taxes and not when their children will be home alone. Teachers break into three groups: a small minority willing to fight, a small minority that hates their enforced union membership and supports Campbell's neoLiberal agenda, and the batch in the middle--many who wish it all just goes away or think that these incremental cuts will never get too bad.

And in a democracy, the majority rules.

The majority (if you can call it that in this twisted electoral system) re-elected Campbell's junta. The majority of adults in society don't want to pay more taxes to fund the education system properly. The majority of parents support teachers except when they must arrange weekday child care for their school-aged children. And the majority of teachers are not willing to sacrifice either extracurricular voluntary clubs and sports teams, or salary to go on strike to improve their own economic condition and learning conditions for students.

If these majorities didn't hold these views, Campbell wouldn't be premier, or taxes would better fund education, or parents would realize they don't have to worry about teachers not babysitting their children, or teachers would put up a bigger fight.

As one teacher put it:

*"There's no such thing as collective bargaining in this kind of an atmosphere when you're just going to be legislated back, or told that you can't take action. People are going to be very, very angry."*

I hope she's right. I fear, though, that only some people will be very angry, but many or most will get over it quite fast.

This isn't the beginning of the end of BC's public education system. It's getting close to the middle of the ending process. The frog is in the pot and the burner has been on for some time now.

As a society, we will get what we deserve...and what we are willing to fight for.

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*Teachers contract legislated*

*Imposed deal offers no salary increase, blocks job action*

Ian Bailey, with files by Jack Keating

The Province

October 4, 2005

CREDIT: Jason Payne, The Province

Tina Delaney, a parent whose child attends Lord Roberts Elementary School in Vancouver's West End, said the teachers and government should be able to reach a settlement.

Outraged leaders of the teachers' union rushed to Vancouver last night to weigh their options after the B.C. government imposed a contract to head off the possibility of a full-blown strike this month.

B.C. Teachers Federation president Jinny Sims called the move a "legislative hammer to punish the teachers of this province."

She refused to discuss options open to the union's executive committee but they include the possibility of defying the law.

Teachers have voted 88 per cent in favour of a strike. Last week they began boycotting staff meetings. They planned rotating strikes beginning Oct. 11 and a full-scale strike on Oct. 24. The imposed contract prevents teachers from legally carrying out that job action.

The legislation, likely to be passed by Thursday, extends the teachers' contract to June 30, 2006, with no wage increases. The previous contract expired in June 2004.

The Liberals are also appointing an industrial inquiry commission to develop a new bargaining process to deal with what Labour Minister Mike de Jong describes as a "broken bargaining system."

Rick Connolly, de Jong's associate deputy minister, said there was no possibility of a negotiated settlement because the teachers and the B.C. Public School Employers Association are too far apart.

Despite meeting 35 times, they were unable to agree on anything.

Teachers are seeking a 15-per-cent wage increase despite a government-imposed zero-per-cent wage increase for all public-sector employees until 2006.

The union said the wage and benefit hikes would cost \$673 million a year while the employers said it would cost \$938 million.

This will be the fifth time since 1994 that B.C. has legislated a contract for teachers. The Liberals last imposed a contract in 2004.

"We're very saddened by the fact that this government is once again trying to use legislation in a punitive

manner against the teachers of this province," said Sims.

"What they're saying is teachers in this province have no rights. We might as well be in servitude.

"This government has an agenda, and we believe their agenda is to silence the teachers' voices so they can privatize public education."

De Jong said he had no options.

"The longer you do nothing, the longer you put off tackling the big problem, which is a negotiating system that has consistently failed."

He said the days of zero-wage mandates is ending, and teachers can expect a "fair and reasonable wage increase" in the next contract.

NDP education critic John Horgan said the government had acted too soon.

"[The legislation] exacerbates the situation," said Horgan, MLA for Malahat-Juan de Fuca. "It inflames an already volatile situation."

Sims said the government's approach does nothing to address teachers' concerns about learning conditions and class sizes.

Hugh Finlayson, head of the B.C. Public School Employers Association which bargains for the 60 school boards, said he was pleased with the imposed contract.

Parents picking up their children at Lord Roberts Elementary in Vancouver's West End were generally supportive of teachers, but concerned about the impact of a strike.

"They deserve to have reduced class sizes," said Alexandria Gowen, who has a son in kindergarten.

"I mean, 30 children and one teacher. No, it doesn't work very well. They don't have individualized attention.

"[The imposed contract] is still better than the teachers and students being out of school. I think the teachers should get what they want, but at the same time our children need to be in school."

Said Julia Simmons, whose daughter is in Grade 3: "I agree with smaller class sizes. And we need more funding for education from the government. I can understand the teachers being upset. I can see them being frustrated. I think it's good for the children [to not have a strike]."

Parent Tina Delaney said teachers are underpaid.

"The government and the teachers should be able to reach a settlement," she said. "They should be able to figure it out."

Vancouver elementary teacher Janet Vesterback said teachers are disgusted and angry.

"It's just disgusting," she said. "There may be different opinions about how to respond to it, but everybody is going to be very offended.

"There's no such thing as collective bargaining in this kind of an atmosphere when you're just going to be legislated back, or told that you can't take action. People are going to be very, very angry."

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## BILL 12

Bill 12, introduced yesterday, marks the fifth time since 1993 that the B.C. government has imposed a contract on teachers.

The legislation, expected to be passed by Thursday, provides no wage increase and carries forward terms and conditions of employment.

The collective agreement for B.C.'s public-school teachers expired in June 2004.

Thirty-five bargaining sessions held since then failed to come up with a new deal.

Indeed, the parties have been unable to negotiate any deal in the 10 years that the existing bargaining structure has been in place.

The government has ruled out a wage increase until the 2006-07 school year, sticking to a so-called zero-wage mandate for public-sector employees.

Teachers have, in comments to the media, focused more on their concern about classroom conditions such as a shortage of teacher librarians than winning a wage hike.

Base annual salaries for teachers range between \$35,000 and \$65,000, depending on experience.