The story of the 2005 BC teachers’ strike
“I am the BCTF”

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Introduction

No one who took part in the 2005 BC teachers’ strike will ever forget it. It changed people’s lives, moved them to do things they did not know they were capable of, made them new friends for life, and engaged the public in a way few strikes ever do. For some, it was yet another in a long list of struggles for teachers’ rights and the rights of kids to quality education. For others, it was their first taste of activism. For those not directly involved but concerned about broad issues of social justice, the strike meant the teachers were taking on the neo-liberal attack on public services. During two weeks of high drama, the teachers were seen by many as proxy fighters in the struggle for quality public services.

This wasn’t just any strike. It was teachers drawing a line in the sand and saying: enough is enough. The broad public seemed to agree, despite years of the media demonizing unions in general, and teachers in particular, as selfish “special interests.” Although genuine inconvenience was caused to many, the public said, “we stand with the teachers.” And the support actually got stronger, not weaker, as the days passed.

Sue Hay, a teacher in Fort Nelson, summed up the experience of many: “Oh! How I did not want to strike! But, oh! How I did not want the government to do what they were doing to us! I phoned my Mum and Dad and was so
worried about being on strike, on a picket line and I’m not political, I cried! Then, I spent two weeks on the picket line with my colleagues. We talked about their issues, we talked about teaching, we talked about students and their needs. We discussed, debated, laughed, cried, and enjoyed each other’s company. We had other people join us and we talked about the issues with them and other unions and parents! Because of the strike, I am more informed, feel closer to my colleagues, have a better understanding of the role of the BCTF as a professional organization, as activists, and as movers and shakers in our province.”

No historic strike has ever taken place that didn’t involve two key elements: careful strategic planning and a unified membership, fed up with how they were being treated. The BC teachers’ strike in the fall of 2005 had both these elements in spades, creating the conditions for one of the most significant strikes in the province’s history.

Seeds of a strike—Tax cuts and essential service legislation

The seeds of the strike had actually been planted four years earlier. No BC government has enthusiastically embraced teachers’ fundamental right to bargain collectively, especially for learning conditions. But with the election of the Liberal Party to power in May 2001, teachers and their unions would face a very different kind of government, one determined both to break the perceived power of the union and to privatize education. Within a month of their election, the Liberal government undertook two actions that would set it on a collision course with public school teachers.

First, the government introduced the largest tax cuts in BC history, cuts that were skewed heavily in favour of the highest income British Columbians and its largest corporations. This tax cut, worth over $2 billion, wiped out an inherited surplus from the previous year of some $1.5 billion. By getting rid of the surplus the government had a ready-made argument against any public sector union seeking a wage increase: “we don’t have the money.”

But the government also took direct action against teachers in July 2001, by introducing legislation that declared teaching an “essential service.” It was a transparent attack on teachers’ right to strike and it signalled just how prominently teachers and their organization would figure in the Liberal government’s agenda. No other group was singled out so early on for such aggressive treatment.
The BCTF acted immediately to oppose the government’s legislation, launching a complaint with the International Labour Organization (ILO), the watchdog for labour rights worldwide. The ILO ruled in the BCTF’s favour. It was the first of four such complaints—all of them ruled on favourably by the international body and all ignored by the Liberal government.

In the fall of 2001, teachers voted 91.4% to strike but took actions that were strictly within the scope of Labour Relations Board (LRB) rulings. This, however, was just the opening round. Anticipating no change in the attitude of the provincial government, the BCTF leadership prepared for a long fight by putting together a plan that would shift the work of the union to a higher plane of political action. While attempting to make the best of a collective bargaining framework that severely restricted what could be bargained, there was a growing sense at the Federation that full collective bargaining rights, and the ability to look after the interests of students, would ultimately have to be achieved in the political realm.

Also in the fall of 2001, the Executive Committee of the BCTF began developing a five-year plan—the Public Education Advocacy Plan. The BCTF planned to significantly strengthen its affiliations with other labour bodies it would need for support: the Canadian Teachers’ Federation, the Canadian Labour Congress, and the BC Federation of Labour. Teachers had opted not to affiliate with the BC Federation of Labour in December 1996, but the BCTF leadership felt affiliation should be considered again given the new government teachers were facing.

Secondly, the Federation also worked to strengthen the union itself by ensuring that any plan implemented by the BCTF centrally would be based on the input from, and have the strongest support possible, amongst teachers and their local associations. The Federation also wanted to build support from parents and from within the hundreds of communities that would be critical to the outcomes of the expected battles over education. To that end, a province-wide consultation was launched with both members and communities to build a *Charter for Public Education*. 

“*I am the BCTF*”—The story of the 2005 BC teachers’ strike 3
The government undermines conditions in the classroom

The Federation did not have to wait long to have their worst fears confirmed about the provincial government’s plans for education, despite following the government’s own rules with respect to essential services as interpreted by the Labour Relations Board, and before teachers withdrew any instruction. In January 2002, the government in Victoria passed Bill 28, the Orwellian-sounding *Public Education Flexibility and Choice Act*. The act stripped the teachers’ collective agreement of working-conditions provisions such as class size and composition, guarantees of services for students with special needs, as well as specialist teachers such as counsellors and teacher-librarians. It further declared that bargaining such issues was now illegal. No other government in Canada had ever simply torn up legally binding contracts.

It would be difficult to overstate the devastating impact the legislation had on teachers. The Liberal government subsequently ripped up other labour contracts too, causing terrible financial hardship for hospital workers in particular. But for teachers, decades of effort to advance the cause and the quality of public education were destroyed. David Chudnovsky, BCTF president at the time, said, “You have to understand that a whole generation of teachers devoted their lives to the issue of learning conditions. In my first week as a teacher in 1978, I attended a big meeting—150 teachers—with the Surrey School Board on the issue of class size. And literally every week from that point, until 2002, I was lobbying, meeting, writing, or mobilizing teachers on the issues around learning conditions. When all that had been achieved was eliminated with a stroke of a pen and bargaining the issues was made illegal, it was devastating and infuriating.”

For years, BC teachers had consciously sacrificed their own financial gains in contract bargaining in order to improve learning conditions in the classroom. They had been hugely successful. As Vancouver’s Glen Hansman of VESTA pointed out: “We had the most nuanced (sic) and detailed language on special needs and integration of any jurisdiction in North America.” It was not always an easy trade-off, but no one ever imagined the advances would simply be wiped out, leaving them with neither pay increases nor improved classroom conditions.
The legislation also provided for a 2.5% yearly salary increase over three years. But, what many in the public did not know, was that the government provided no additional funding for the increases in years two and three. This meant that for the legislation to be implemented, and it was legally binding, school boards would have to take money from other parts of the system. In fact, adding insult to injury, many of the things that would be cut to provide the salary increase were precisely those things teachers had successfully bargained for in the past.

The first response of most teachers was shock and many described it as a search for safety. Often the response to being under attack is just to hunker down. Teachers increasingly closed their classroom doors and went about their work. Teachers reported that, as a result, some of the normal collegiality was lost, and the sense of a community of learners was undermined by a feeling of vulnerability. That loss of collegiality could also have translated into a loss of political will. As David Chudnovsky recalled “Teachers felt they had nobody—they had lost their collective agreement, they had lost their students’ learning conditions, many felt that action to change things seemed futile.”

The BCTF leadership believed it was critical that teachers not be left to deal with the situation on their own. The BCTF sent its Executive Committee members on a tour of the province to find out what was happening to their members. Chudnovsky recalled the goals of the community visits. “We went out there to talk to teachers, to find out how they were coping—to listen to them but also to make the point really strongly that it was the BCTF and teachers who were the defenders of education and that we had to have a long-term strategic plan to do that.”

But people were also extremely angry, according to Kim Hansen, a Nisga’a teacher. “People were so angry it was actually pretty hard to hold the line. A lot of people wanted to walk off right away. But timing is everything, and the BCTF executive did a great job because trying to persuade people who are really pissed off to wait ’til the time is right, is really difficult.”
The ripping up of the contract was the genesis of the historic 2005 confrontation with the government. It wasn’t just the legislation; it was the extreme arrogance that characterized how the government went about it. Teachers had put up with a lot over the years—an often hostile media, disdain from virtually every government, the sacrifice of their financial benefits. This time though, the government had just gone too far. The undermining of conditions in the classroom was seen by many as paving the way for privatization, when the public system would be so damaged that parents would turn to private alternatives for their children’s education.

It would take some time but the government, in tearing up the contract, had made the first of a long series of political miscalculations. Each one—each insult, each new assault on teachers’ rights—became a building block for the ultimate confrontation with the government.

Up until the government tore up their contract, individual teachers had some control over their work situation. If there was a problem they could go to the administration and say, Look, there’s a class-size limit in the agreement and you have put seven more students in my class than is allowed. I want this addressed. And under the contract their concern had to be addressed. However, they lost this control with the elimination of the contract, creating an intolerable situation that became the source of teachers’ determination in the 2005 strike. The government argued that class-size limits were in legislation, but the limits were higher and applied only to primary grades.

First attempts at fighting back

The first expression of teachers’ determination to fight back came soon after the passing of the Public Education Flexibility and Choice Act.

On January 28, 2005, teachers held a one-day political protest against the government’s action. It was a risky move. Other public-sector unions did organize rallies, demonstrations, and other public actions. But none had confidence in their members’ resolve to confront the government that had just won the largest election mandate in the province’s history. The one-day teachers’ protest sent a message, best expressed by BCTF President David Chudnovsky speaking to a rally of
some 15,000 teachers at the Agrodome on January 28. Clearly looking ahead in the struggle, he told cheering teachers: “This is not a one-day protest—this is day one of the protest.” Looking back at the lead up to the strike, Chudnovsky says: “The way to look at this is that right from the 2001 bargaining round forward, through the essential services legislation, through Bills 27 and 28, the order to stop talking to parents, all of it, was a continuous, unbroken struggle that culminated in the 2005 strike.”

At the BCTF office, the executive reviewed all of the organization’s work and looked at how it could advance political action and public communications. In the spring, following the tearing up of the contract, the BCTF undertook a major reorganization of its staff, establishing a Field Service Division. According to BCTF Vice-President Irene Lanzinger: “We spent more resources on school-based meetings than we did in the previous 50 years combined. Talking to members, constantly talking to members, getting feedback, saying what our options were and what we hoped to achieve. The members were always there to support our actions because they were making the decisions.”

Involving teachers in their own fight to regain their rights was not as straightforward as it might sound. The fight was also one to help teachers regain their dignity and confidence as professionals. Part of the assault on teachers was an unremitting effort to denigrate their professional skills. A principal method of doing this was enforcement of “measurement” and “accountability.” As Barry Dorval, of Vernon, put it: “The intense pressure teachers felt around the whole push for measurement and accountability meant their professional judgment wasn’t trusted any more and they had to be measured and watched all the time, as if we were trying to get away with something.”

It is easy to see how the efforts to undermine teachers’ self-worth as professionals would also accomplish the government’s political objective: to critically weaken the BCTF—the teachers’ political voice. The phenomenon of teachers “just closing their doors” not only affected collegiality, it affected solidarity. At first the government’s strategy worked. The Federation concentrated on just teachers talking to them. It didn’t happen overnight. The environment of fear resulted in people trying to endear themselves to administrators by doing more and more volunteer work because people felt “who is going to be there to defend me?” But then the layoff notices started and that helped to focus teachers’ attention. Going into their classrooms and closing the door had not fixed the problem. With layoffs and school closings, learning conditions were going to getting worse. Teachers realized they had to open their doors and engage in a dialogue with their organization.
Building strength through small victories

If 2002 was a talking year, engaging teachers in developing their advocacy plan and regaining confidence, 2003 was a year of building that would take teachers several steps closer to where they had to be to successfully take on the government. At the 2003 AGM in March, teachers established a Public Education Defence Fund to help implement their advocacy plan. And that same month they voted 58% to affiliate with the BC Federation of Labour. A political fight against a determined government, with the power to make laws with virtually no opposition (the NDP had just two seats, and virtually no resources) would need many allies, and especially other unions. Being part of the BC Fed was important both symbolically, as a clear statement that the BCTF was formally a union, as well as practically. Organized labour had always been sympathetic to teachers, but now the BCTF was one of their own.

The government took more steps to strip teachers of their professional authority. In May 2003, the government moved to take control of the College of Teachers away from teachers. The Federation had mixed views about the role of the college, but maintained that if it was necessary it should at least be democratic. Teachers paid for it through individual teacher fees and they had a majority of the council positions. Summarily changing the college structure to give total control to the government was a serious political miscalculation on the part of the government. As it turned out, the move became yet another factor building toward the ultimate confrontation with the government in 2005.

It wasn’t just taking control away, the new college council changed its focus to setting standards and “fixing teachers,” even distributing a brochure that encouraged parents to complain to the college about their child’s teacher. Michelle Davies, a teacher in the Queen Charlottes, commented: “The new standards are completely open to
interpretation, which leaves huge discretion as to what is acceptable; who gets to interpret that? The vagueness gave power to parents who didn’t happen to like a certain teacher, for whatever reason, which had nothing to do with their job.”

Teachers then voted to refuse to pay their college fees. Technically, this meant teachers who were not members of the college could not teach in BC public schools. When the overwhelming majority of BC teachers refused to pay their fees to the college, the government was forced to back down. It could not order school boards to fire 30,000 teachers. The government paid the $2 million to the college and then Education Minister Christy Clark demanded repayment from teachers. Teachers refused and called the government’s bluff. President Neil Worboys recalled: “When they voted not to pay their dues it was a huge success—a real political victory over the government.”

In December 2003, Education Minister Christy Clark, who had already inadvertently played the role of uniting teachers through her frequent attacks on them, made a public statement to the effect that no one had ever told her there were any problems with education. Christy Clark, in a meeting with the BCTF table officers, said that she had never heard there were any problems about the inadequate funding for education. Combined with her refusal to sit down and talk to teachers, this haughtiness began to cement an image of Clark and the government as arrogant. That image conflicted with one of the strongest core values of Canadians—fairness. By the time the strike took place, their unfair treatment at the hands of the Liberal government would prove to be one of the key reasons for the broad public support for teachers.

In response to Clark’s spurious claim, the Federation organized a Caravan Against the Cuts with five school buses driving across the province and ending up in Victoria to deliver evidence of the problems created by the Liberal government’s education policies—school
closures, teacher layoffs, cuts to programs, and increasingly difficult classroom conditions. Each community contributed its own evidence as the bus arrived at their locale. In Mackenzie, teachers, parents, and support workers contributed a tombstone for the groundskeepers’ reduced time; in Keremeos, five parents and three teachers contributed life-size cardboard cut-outs of teachers, each with detailed statistics on education losses; in Invermere, the bus picked up a coffin filled with tabulated data on class-size increases and other documentation—all for delivery to the minister.

It was just one more building block in getting members and the public to support increased funding for public education. Neil Worboys, BCTF president at the time, recalled: “The role the caravan played was to bring our members out of their classrooms and also involve parents. The materials collected were not just from teachers but from parents, students, and community members. When we started unloading it all in front of the legislature, it actually rattled the government but most importantly it boosted the solidarity of teachers amongst themselves.”

The Caravan Against the Cuts, the extensive media campaigns, and efforts by local teacher associations to engage with parents had the desired effect. The government’s message that there was no problem was being drowned in a sea of counter-messages. It led the government to take yet another step that would eventually backfire, and feed teachers’ anger and resolve in their efforts to regain their rights. At the behest of the government, many school boards ordered teachers not to talk to parents about the cuts and their effects on learning conditions.

On this issue, it was not just the government that teachers had to face down. It was also the provincial parents’ group, the British Columbia Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils (BCCPAC). The campaign to talk to parents circumvented BCCPAC, which was actively promoting the notion that teachers were spending the whole teacher-parent interview time bashing the government. Many teachers
and certainly the BCTF, saw BCCPAC as an organization unwilling to advocate for the needed resources in schools. Yet, according to Worboys, “It’s true that BCCPAC was a fan club of the Liberals, but we decided that we would not abandon any of the education organizations—we kept up the dialogue. We weren’t able to influence a change in the leadership but at the local level we did change the minds of many individual parents.”

The BCTF challenged the school boards’ orders that teachers not talk to parents about the impact of government policies. An arbitrator ruled not only that teachers had a right to speak to parents about education issues—including the changing learning conditions in the classroom—but they had a responsibility to do so. The BC Public School Employers’ Association (BCPSEA) appealed the decision and in August 2005, the BC Court of Appeal ruled in favour of the teachers.

The many confrontations that preceded the 2005 strike can be seen as a series of building blocks of teachers’ resolve. The fight for freedom of speech was one building block and the college fight was another. Each assault by government, and each successful response, built teachers’ confidence.

Reaching out to communities

By the end of 2003, the dynamics of the struggle between the government and the teachers was already well established. The BCTF had made extraordinary efforts to ensure that no teacher, no school, and no local teachers’ association felt left out of the decision-making around the advocacy plan. Whatever was going to happen in the fight with the government, teachers were extraordinarily well prepared.

Teachers almost universally credit the BCTF for the extraordinary efforts made to engage rural teachers, something that was not always done well. Charlene Hodgson, a local school rep in the Peace River district recalled: “Up in Dawson Creek, they really felt they were being consulted, that their views were important, and that they were consulted repeatedly. The Executive Committee and the table officers were visiting and they went to all the geographic areas. They didn’t just go to Dawson Creek, they also drove out to the two sub-locals and that was really important to the members out there who often felt isolated.”

Equally important, as teachers experienced and struggled with the effects of the cuts, students and their parents were experiencing...
the BCTF strike over a year later, were visible when the HEU engaged in a political protest at the end of April 2004. Over 40,000 health workers walked off the job. In response, the Liberal government passed yet another draconian piece of legislation, Bill 37, ordering an end to the week-old strike of the HEU, cutting their wages by 15%, and promising more contracting out of union jobs. HEU refused to go back and the labour movement responded with widespread support. The teachers, government workers, and numerous private sector unions were slated to walk out in protest Monday, May 3, 2004, once again threatening to escalate labour solidarity. Late Sunday night, an agreement was hammered out between the Campbell government, the HEU, and the BC Federation of Labour. Had the deal not been

Acting in the public interest

The advocacy work was inevitably building toward what everyone, members and the Federation alike, felt would be some form of confrontation with the government. And it was taking place in the context of a political culture that was about more than narrow unionism. It was about social justice and human rights. Ken Novakowski, BCTF executive director, was there for much of the BCTF’s history: “We have always been there and responded. If you go back to 1971, the first province-wide protest day when the whole province walked out over the pension issue. Then in 1983, when the Solidarity action was happening—the teachers were the single most important union to take action early. It was our involvement in that action that forced the government to take notice.” While there were education issues involved, teachers in that strike were out primarily because of the broader issue of human rights and social programs. “It was a social solidarity strike,” said Novakowski. “Again in 1987 the same thing. The labour movement called for a one-day general strike. It was standing up to regressive legislation.”
signed, 40,000 teachers would have been protesting with the HEU.

There was near unanimity within the labour movement that the only solution to the government’s ruthless assaults on workers’ rights was an electoral solution. The BCTF made that a formal policy at its March 2004 AGM, when it decided to focus major resources on the next election whose date had already been fixed by legislation for May 2005. The goal of the $5-million campaign was to make education a vote-changing issue, that is, one that people would actually base their vote on. To do that meant that every available and willing teacher would be recruited to the task, a fact reflected by the $3 million of the campaign being devoted to making members effective election activists. Each local had a designated election contact, many of them on release.

The message had to be simple and straightforward, and it had to connect with ordinary British Columbians’ values. That message was the same as it had been for the past two years—it was about class size, class composition, and learning conditions for students. To stick, the message had to be repeated in every venue, with every audience, in media ads, and in the messages that every local teacher association put out in their communities. By election time, the vast majority of BC citizens knew what the issues in education were.

The 2005 election results were gratifying to a point. The Liberals now faced a large NDP opposition across the floor of the legislature, rather than just two members. Yet the nature of parliamentary democracy meant that, unless the government saw this close race as a lesson, nothing would necessarily change. They could still pass any legislation they wanted and that is what the BCTF leadership expected.

The dramatic days of the strike

By September 2005, it was clear that teachers would have to take action if they were going to achieve any serious bargaining. Teachers had endured four years of skirmishes, the contemptuous dismissal of
teachers’ concerns, the College of Teachers’ battle, the repeated ILO decisions ignored by the BC Liberals, the attempted gag orders, the loss of thousands of teaching positions, and the closing of over 100 schools.

On September 15, the BCPSEA publicly declared an impasse after 35 bargaining sessions, mostly because the bargaining structure imposed by the government made any meaningful negotiations impossible. The employer’s call for government intervention on September 19 led to both sides meeting with Labour Minister Mike de Jong, which revealed that the government did not see this as an education issue but as a labour issue. The meetings led to the appointment of Associate Deputy Labour Minister Rick Connolly as a “fact-finder,” mandated to report back on September 30. In the meantime, the teachers had already begun lobbying MLAs and the BCTF was running media ads across the province on their themes of class size, class composition, and learning conditions for students.

The teachers began their strike vote September 20, at the same time that the bargaining committee was having its first meeting with Connolly. On September 23, the union announced the vote: 88.5% in favour of strike action. The overwhelming percentage and high turnout—nearly 32,000 teachers out of 38,000—was no surprise to anyone. At the same time, lawyers for the BCTF and BCPSEA met with the Labour Relations Board to determine essential-service levels.

The government’s response to the huge strike vote showed that it realized the teachers’ campaign among parents and the community was working. The government claimed in their public statements that they were going to start monitoring class sizes and acknowledged that it was a concern. They had added $150 million to the education kitty and “encouraged” school boards to address the issue.

The BCTF executive issued its job-action plans publicly on Saturday, September 24, along with its salary demand of 15% over three years. It also made clear that restoring full collective bargaining rights and the restoration of contract language stripped in 2002 were key demands. The first phase of its job action would begin the next Wednesday, September 28, with teachers refusing to engage in certain administrative tasks. The next phase would begin two weeks later and involve rotating strikes on a district-by-district basis. A full-scale walkout would not take place until October 24.

On September 30, as scheduled, Associate Deputy Labour Minister Rick Connolly gave his “fact-finding” report to the provincial government. It concluded: “…because of the positions of the two parties on the two major issues [salary and contract language], it is my opinion that there is no prospect for a voluntary resolution at the bargaining table in these negotiations.” The report would have the
effect of escalating the conflict and was a signal for the government to move to a legislated settlement before teachers could engage in a full-scale strike. On Monday, October 3, the government tabled Bill 12, legislation that would impose a settlement on teachers with a salary freeze until June 30, 2006, and would do nothing to address students’ learning conditions. The BCTF’s executive members travelled to Vancouver for an emergency meeting and developed an action plan that locals would vote on over the next two days.

Across the province thousands of teachers poured into halls, gyms, and hotel conference rooms to take a vote it seemed they had been waiting forever to take. Barry Dorval, local president in Vernon, remembers his meeting. “What a meeting. Here we have 400 teachers packed into a gym. And it was quiet, quiet, quiet. I had expected a lot of speakers and lots of questions. There was a whole series of recommendations, probably a dozen, and we were supposed to go through them one by one. I could just see the intensity building and then we got to the fourth or fifth one and it said that we walk away and not return until we have something we can live with and the room just exploded—pandemonium, people cheering, it was unbelievable. They were so ready.”

Debra Swain, local president in Victoria, described her meeting: “It was one of the biggest we ever had in our local. We had over 900 people show up—just phenomenal. Our general meetings get 100 people. People were outraged, just outraged at the government unilaterally making that decision. Victoria is a very respectful, traditional community but we had member after member get up to the mike and speak so passionately about what the issues were—imploring members to support the BCTF recommendation to strike until we were satisfied with the results.”

Teachers were so eager to go out at some meetings they did not want to wait to bother with the formalities. At one meeting Jinny Sims attended, “…about halfway through, someone said, to heck with this, let’s just vote. I said absolutely not. We’re not going to just vote. You have to know the possible consequences. I want you to be sure that when you mark that ‘x’ you mean it.”

The media reported on a rapid series of developments over the next few days. Teachers voted overwhelmingly again on strike action—this time by 90.5%. The Liberals had intended to pass the bill routinely but the NDP mounted a determined and exhausting filibuster through Thursday and into Friday morning past 5:00 a.m. before the bill was finally passed. The BC Federation of Labour immediately voted to support the strike and called on labour councils around the province to organize rallies in support of the teachers’
demands. The Federation also met with Labour Minister Mike de Jong to try to influence the government. On October 6, the Labour Relations Board ruled the planned province-wide walk out would be an illegal strike, before it even happened, and the BCPSEA immediately filed a motion in the Supreme Court. The court scheduled a hearing for October 9. On Friday, October 7, BC teachers began an historic, indefinite strike, putting to rest media speculation about another one-day protest. The battle had begun. At their side on the picket line was CUPE who had a special relationship with the BCTF going back to their own strike in 2000, but equally important, because they worked together in the schools and shared the goals of improved learning conditions for students.

Almost everyone but the teachers seemed surprised by the action and by the teachers’ determination to stay out until they were satisfied with the results. The government seemed to be caught totally off guard and, according to The Vancouver Sun, “…scrambled all day to defuse the situation. Veteran BC mediator, Vince Ready, was appointed as an Industrial Inquiry Commissioner to find a new bargaining structure for teachers.” The day before the strike, the government, in a kind of death-bed repentance on the class-size issue, struck a permanent Learning Round Table to discuss class sizes, class composition, and other issues related to learning conditions, with stakeholders. But it was a classic example of too little, too late.

That there would be widespread public support for teachers was clear right from the outset with letters to the editor and callers to talk shows showing people were fed up with government bullying. The teachers had successfully identified the issue as a concern for education quality for kids and the government seemed powerless to change the public perception. Surrey teacher Lorraine Walsh, a self-described ageing, grey-haired elementary school teacher, said in a letter to The Vancouver Sun, “I’m sick and tired of being misjudged and mistreated... For the first time in many years, I am proud to be a teacher and, with 42,000 colleagues from around the province, I will stand up for education and my own self-worth. I’ll put on my picket sign and march for myself, my students, and the future of BC education.” She could have been speaking for every teacher in the province.

Even letters critical of both sides demonstrated the total success of the teachers’ communications plan of keeping the message simple and repeating it thousands of times to multiple audiences. Everyone talked about how, as one letter put it, the government “increased class sizes, cut support for special-needs kids, and shut down school libraries.”

Over the first weekend of the strike, after the first day on the picket...
lines, the BCTF held meetings with the BC Federation of Labour and CUPE, which had already honoured the teachers’ picket lines along with other support staff unions. At the same time BCPSEA was in the BC Supreme Court asking for a contempt citation against the teachers and heavy fines. Justice Brenda Brown, on Sunday afternoon, found that the striking teachers were acting in contempt of a Labour Relations Board order that declared the job action illegal. She ordered the teachers back to work. However, penalties would not be determined until the following Thursday.

On Tuesday, October 11—day two of the strike—rallies organized by the labour councils in 19 centres across the province gave a huge boost to the morale of teachers. The show of union solidarity so quickly, and in so many communities, eliminated any anxiety teachers may have had that they would be in the fight alone. In Prince George, 600 teachers, other unionists, and supporters rallied outside the constituency office of Education Minister Shirley Bond.

Thursday, October 13, was a day all the strikers, and everybody else involved, were waiting for. Would Judge Brenda Brown issue huge fines and break the union’s bank? Anything was possible but what Brown did surprised many. There were no huge fines, no arrests. The strike was illegal and the union and its members were in contempt so what Justice Brown did was try to make it impossible for the BCTF to continue to finance the illegal action. She imposed an injunction on union expenditures to support the strike, including a ban on strike pay. She appointed a monitor who would be stationed at the BCTF building to ensure the court’s orders were followed.
The ban on strike pay did not have the impact that it seems the judge and the media had expected it would. Michael Smyth of the Vancouver Province declared: “Broke and demoralized teachers crossing picket lines to return to work will have a withering effect on the union’s resolve.” Instead, if anything, it stiffened the resolve of rank-and-file teachers to stay out. Erin Fitzpatrick, a French immersion and social studies teacher told The Vancouver Sun: “For most of us, it’s not about wages and it’s certainly not about strike pay. It’s not about money. If I wanted money, I wouldn’t be a teacher.” Scores of teachers interviewed across the province had identical messages.

Some media analysts and labour relations’ experts described the judge’s moves as innovative and sophisticated in that she had bent over backwards not to choose sides in the dispute. One commentator wrote: “There must be some glum faces around the cabinet table. This is a government that has been using a sledgehammer to sort out delicate social problems. It obviously expected Justice Brown to do the same. She didn’t. She told the government that if it doesn’t make some serious effort to negotiate with the teachers, this strike could go on for a month.”

The response to the banning of strike pay was immediate. People on the picket lines reported ordinary citizens coming up to them and donating money to the strikers, and virtually the next day the Federation of Post-Secondary Educators were visiting picket lines and handing out $50 food vouchers. It was a huge boost to morale. Four days after the court ruling, the Canadian Teachers’ Federation, the umbrella organization of all teacher unions across the country, intervened with the creation of the Hardship Fund. It was intended to help those teachers who would be immediately financially stressed—young teachers with debts, teachers with large families, those who were their family’s only breadwinners. And the BC Federation of Labour began organizing a huge rally in Victoria for October 17.

In the meantime, any doubts about the level of support for the teachers had quickly dissolved. In the South Okanagan, local president Ritchie Kendrick reported that: “Almost every school had students coming out and not just for a few minutes. They stuck around, some for a few hours, some all day. They would walk with us and were willing to be interviewed. They understood that we were standing up for their rights to a quality education.” The support of students was widespread: “We want to let the government know we have a voice, too,” said Lindsay Amantea, a Grade 11 student who organized a student rally in support of the teachers in Vancouver the day after the court decision.
One of the most remarkable aspects of public support for teachers was the apparent lack of concern amongst hundreds of thousands of BC citizens over the fact that this was an illegal strike, which is usually the trump card in governments’ and media’s criticism of such strikes.

The solidarity of teachers on the picket lines never wavered. Some of the teacher activists, like Jerelynn MacNeil of Golden, had wondered before the strike about the resolve of younger teachers. “It was a huge concern leading up to the strike. Our younger teachers weren’t so familiar with the issues and were busy just keeping their heads above water. There are a lot of young teachers here and we were counting on them. They absolutely came through. They were very strong and sure of what they were doing.”

What amazed teachers as the strike went into its second week was that public support was actually getting stronger. Parents and non-parents were constantly bringing food, coffee, hot chocolate, and tonnes of donuts. October was nasty that year, and across the province, parents and others set up tents, built shelters, or brought firewood for the burning barrels that teachers used to keep warm. They brought whatever they felt teachers needed. The honking of horns in support, people coming by to chat, and thousands of e-mails to the BCTF indicated broad and sustained public support.

Even the media began to change. Jinny Sims thinks the level of public support gave reporters the courage to report on what was actually happening—and on the issues. “At first, they were very hard on us. What changed them was the courage and determination of teachers. But the biggest thing was that they actually got to meet and talk with actual teachers. It was a real eye-opener. One reporter did a 20-minute salary case on Global TV comparing our salaries over the previous 10 years. For the public, that news item was a turning point. We weren’t even keeping up to the cost of living.”

By the beginning of week two, the media’s slant on the strike was decidedly different. Even Michael Smyth’s contempt for teachers (he had accused BCTF President
Jinny Sims of displaying predictable moral outrage, and suffering from delusions of grandeur and revelling in her martyr complex) had changed to ridiculing Premier Gordon Campbell for not cutting short a trip to deal with the issue, and for failing to provide leadership. A guest editorial in the Victoria Times Colonist written by lawyer Sucha Ollek asked the question: “What moral authority does the premier have to tell the teachers to respect the law?” reminding people that the Liberals had broken international law nine times, tore up legal contracts, and had a drunk-driving premier who believed he should get “…to take a time-out from having to obey the law.”

But the media never entirely gave up trying to find members of the public who were “outraged” by the strike. It was a hard task and most “streeters” on TV showed people in support. Reporters privately admitted to Federation spokespeople that try as they might, they simply couldn’t find people who opposed the teachers. They were always on the lookout, too, for teachers angry at the BCTF. But that also failed, as highlighted by Natasha Tattersall, a young teacher from Burnaby interviewed in the later days of the strike by a television reporter who demanded to know how she felt about being “forced” out on strike by the BCTF. In a completely spontaneous response, which brought cheers and tears from teachers across the province, she replied: “I am the BCTF.”

On Friday, October 14, day five of the strike, organized labour in the province announced that it was escalating the action against the government. It was calling on members of all its affiliates to walk off the job in Greater Victoria on Monday, October 17. Jim Sinclair, head of the BC Fed, along with 14 fellow labour leaders, including George Heyman of the BC Government and Services Employees’ Union and Barry O’Neill of CUPE, declared: “Our goal is very clear. We want a fair deal for BC teachers that ends this dispute and gives teachers the dignity that everyone knows they deserve and provides our kids with the quality education they need.”

But everyone in the labour movement and in the social movement organizations that had fought government cutbacks in 2002, knew it was more than that. Jinny Sims certainly knew: “Since this government came to power their actions have hurt working people and there was a desire in the province for someone—please!—to take a stand,” said Sims. “People were beaten in this province and in many ways they felt that the leadership of organized labour had failed them. I still hear that when I travel around. We acted as a lightning rod for people to gather around and express their pent-up frustration and a desire for a different kind of a BC.”

When Jim Sinclair threatened more action if the government did not negotiate with teachers, Mike de Jong reiterated the government’s position—they would not talk to teachers so long as they were on illegal
strike. But the more intransigent de Jong was, the more determined were teachers’ supporters. *The Vancouver Sun* reported that the same day “...about 200 Vancouver students made their opinions known Friday at a raucous rally at the intersection of Granville and Broadway. ‘The government is clearly showing its contempt and lack of concern for the teachers, for the students, and for the people of Vancouver,’ said Ian Thomas, a Grade 12 student at Sir Winston Churchill secondary. ‘...I have classes with 37 people in them and it’s ridiculous to think these are good conditions to be learning in.’ said Sasha Langford, a Grade 11 student at Kitsilano.”

October 17, day six of the strike, was a high point for the teachers and for union solidarity in confronting the Campbell government. The media reported 12,000 people in front of the Legislature in Victoria—well below union estimates—and the city’s services were brought to a virtual standstill as thousands of unionized workers heeded the call to walk off the job. Every president of every teacher federation in the country was there. All CUPE members on Vancouver Island walked off in sympathy. In just one of several rotating protests, October 18, was “CUPE Day” in the north with protests staged in 15 northern communities including Prince George, Prince Rupert, Dawson Creek, Terrace, and Quesnel with about 15,000 CUPE members at municipal workplaces, post-secondary institutions, and recreation centres holding rallies and other actions.

Many unions supported the strike and many workers lost days of pay in doing so from CUPW to HEU. But of all the unions giving support it was CUPE that stands out in teachers’ memories as the most dedicated to sticking with teachers.
no matter what. From the first day of the strike, CUPE BC President Barry O’Neill made it clear the union was with the teachers until the teachers asked them to stand down. Terrace teacher Veralynn Munson stated: “We thought we were going to be out there alone. We cannot say enough about the role of Barry O’Neill, the CUPE president in BC. They were just with us at our side right from the beginning. The day that CUPE took a day of protest here it was just a huge boost for teachers. I will remember it for my lifetime.” BCTF Second Vice-President Susan Lambert added: “There was a profound appreciation of CUPE for that action but it was more than that—these are people we work with everyday in the schools.”

The absolute determination of the Campbell government to deny teachers their victory backfired day by day as the teachers’ fight garnered more and more support. The day of the Victoria shutdown, the Ipsos Reid poll showed that 57% of British Columbians supported the strike (slightly higher than the previous week) while just 37% were opposed. School boards in Nicola-Similkameen, Vancouver Island North, Vancouver, Surrey, Revelstoke, and Cowichan Valley all came out publicly in support of a return to collective bargaining. School District 5, (Southeast Kootenay) declared: “This government has handcuffed the school boards who are the employers of the teachers in not allowing our representative, BCPSEA, to negotiate a fair and reasonable collective agreement.”

Even some editorial writers expressed disgust with the undemocratic behaviour of the government. In an October 5 editorial, The Vernon Morning Star lambasted the Liberals: “Once again the Liberal government in Victoria is acting like a school yard bully, throwing its weight around and changing the rules halfway through the game.” The Prince George Citizen took Education Minister Shirley Bond to task saying she “…should acknowledge that teachers had no wage increase in the late 1990s. Instead of an increase, teachers bargained with the government for learning and working condition improvements.” Even some normally cynical media managers were beginning to accept the teachers’ view of the struggle.

The CTF’s hardship fund—over a million dollars—kicked off an outpouring of support from literally every teacher organization in the country. They, along with thousands of individual teachers, contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars to the fund with a couple of contributions in the range of $300,000 to $400,000.
Teachers everywhere faced similar governments and the BCTF was perceived as fighting for them all. As more teachers discovered just how ruthless the government was, the support for the strike spread beyond Canada’s borders. Washington teachers came up to walk the picket lines, a South African teachers’ union offered to sell their building if need be, Mexican supporters protested at the Canadian consulate, messages of solidarity came in from Australia, Britain, and across Latin America. A strike that had started out as a fight for basic rights in British Columbia was turning into a cause célèbre in the international fight against neo-liberalism. Ironically, it could not have happened without the continued intransigence of the Liberal government that, despite setback after setback, refused to budge.

On October 17, the government announced it was appointing a special prosecutor to determine if criminal contempt charges should be laid. The next day it came to light that Crown Counsel had informed the government that they would refuse to prosecute, declaring them in a conflict of interest. Given their similar treatment at the hands of the Liberal government (legislation nullifying two binding arbitration awards to the prosecutors) the prosecutors stated there would be “an apprehension of bias.”

Day seven of the strike, Tuesday, October 18, showed the first signs that the government believed it would have to soften its stand in the face of continued public support for teachers. They expanded a task already given to Vince Ready, the province’s best-known labour mediator. Until then his mandate did not include the actual strike—just fixing the bargaining system. But he was now a facilitator and on that basis BCTF representatives met with Ready to identify their key issues. Teachers felt some guarded optimism because Ready was known as a tireless negotiator and one who would not take on a job unless he was convinced both sides would move. However, as the facilitation process got under way, further court action loomed as Judge Brenda Brown reserved until October 21 her ruling on a BCPSEA application for the imposition of a heavy fine on the BCTF.

Once Vince Ready was given an actual mandate to facilitate an agreement, the teachers had won a key victory. The government had blinked. It was doing what it said it would never do—negotiate with the union while it was engaged in an illegal strike. But the labour movement did not relent in its pressure. While it held off major action on the Tuesday waiting to hear a substantial offer from the government, on Wednesday the 19, (day eight of the strike) the labour
movement organized a huge protest in Southeast BC. Thousands of public-sector workers closed municipal operations and teachers set up picket lines at private-sector sites that some 800 workers respected. Members of Local 1-450 of the Steelworkers union refused to cross picket lines at Tembec operations in Elco and Canal Flats, the Canfor mill in Radium, among other sites. The Vancouver Sun reported that rallies in Cranbrook, Trail, and Nelson attracted between 500 and 1,000 demonstrators. There was no sign that support for the teachers was waning.

Despite the shutdowns and broad public support, the government still had not revealed its hand regarding any concessions. The teachers held a news conference to reveal their proposal for a settlement, with a number of compromises, including accepting the option of having class-size limits included in legislation. But just moments later, Vince Ready made his own announcement. Based on the teachers’ proposal for a settlement, and what he knew about the government’s position, he declared the negotiations to be at a stalemate.

As the strike entered its final days, what had promised to be a broad labour movement victory over an anti-union government hit an impasse. Plans for a union shutdown of the Lower Mainland, being organized by the BC Federation of Labour, were called off before Vince Ready’s recommendations were even released. Federation President Jim Sinclair told the media that the BCFed’s executives had considered a strike would not be appropriate while teachers were considering Ready’s recommendations.

This cancellation of the Lower Mainland shutdown can be considered a missed opportunity at a time when thousands of union members and other supporters were feeling most empowered. Some felt it weakened the teachers’ hand. Polls showed support for the strike out-distancing opposition by 63% to 19%. Jinny Sims commented: “People had a momentum and expectations that were building. So many unions, HEU was great, the ferry workers’ union was absolutely phenomenal. And Sinclair, he was in a very difficult position trying to juggle this huge labour force. The phone calls at the end were all about wanting something bigger, people wanted justice, a chance to show Campbell that they weren’t just going to roll over. CUPE went out anyway. There was a lot of anger and a lot of hurt.”

October 21, day ten of the historic teachers’ strike, was marked by the CUPE walkout in the Lower Mainland, the BCTF’s announcement that it was accepting, conditionally, Vince Ready’s recommendations, and the government’s announcement that it was accepting Ready’s recommendations unconditionally.

The BCTF Executive Committee recommended to its members that the agreement be accepted and voting would take place over the weekend.
The vote was a result of a change in BCTF policy mandating that any return to work had to be voted on by the membership. The terms included $40 million to harmonize teachers’ salaries throughout the province, an additional $20 million on top of previously announced funds to reduce class sizes and deal with students with special needs, a one-time payment of $40 million to the Federation’s long-term disability fund, and an increase in pay for substitute teachers to $190. The government committed to consulting with the BCTF on how to include class-size limits in the School Act.

The passion among many teachers produced an initial gut reaction to say no to the agreement. The outpouring of public support, parent support, and the amazing union solidarity had given teachers a sense of their own power that was hard to give up. Charlene Hodgson, of Dawson Creek, recalls her own local’s response: “Our area voted against going back to work. They were ready to stay out because they felt so empowered by the Executive Committee, by the BCTF, by field staff, by everybody—they were ready to go out and stay out. They had empowered them so much that some of our members felt we didn’t get everything they had gone out for. They just couldn’t hear what the executive was telling them at the end—that this was a good deal and that we would go back and work from there.” In the end, the majority of teachers realized that perhaps their most important victory was in staying out for two weeks, maintaining enormous public support, and exposing the Liberal government as a bully. Teachers voted 77.7% to accept the agreement and returned to work on Monday, October 24.

Jinny Sims has said of the agreement: “The agreement was not perfect but much better than we ever expected. They swore up and down that no one would break the zero mandate. So our settlement was pretty good. Are they still out to underfund, privatize, and blame everybody else? Yes. Have we got our bargaining rights back? No. Have we given up our fight or our rights? No. Are we going to continue 24/7? Yes. For me it is the passion from within.”

Judge Brenda Brown ordered a $500,000 fine to punish teachers for refusing her earlier return-to-work order. It was one of the largest fines ever imposed on a union in Canada and would have been even larger were the strike not coming to an end. The judge decreed that the fine be distributed to charities to be chosen by the BCTF in consensus with the BCPSEA. Three groups shared the money: the United Way, the RR Smith Memorial Foundations, which provides bursaries to education students, and the Special Education Partners Group.
Aftermath of the strike

In the aftermath of the amazing strike of 2005, teachers still have mixed feelings. Some of the elements of the agreement have been extremely slow to be implemented. The government seems to have learned little. The 2007 Throne Speech once again foretold of legislation to overturn a court ruling, this time against school fees. Clearly there are more fights ahead with a government still intent on undermining public education and teachers.

But for Sheila Wyse, president of Cariboo-Chilcotin Teachers’ Association, the empowerment engendered by the strike is still there: “It was the perfect storm for us. It brought the issues to the public and we are still able to use that public understanding. They remember and they trust us now when we have issues. Teachers have a whole new feeling about their ability to affect a change. They will not forget those skills. They may put them on the back shelf for a while but they know they are there when they need them.”

Perhaps the teachers’ biggest victory was regaining their dignity and respect as professionals and particularly re-establishing that respect in the eyes of the public. After years of being denigrated by both the mass media and by the Liberal government, neither would again so casually miscalculate the resolve of teachers to defend the rights of their students. And that is how the vast majority of the public saw it. In addition to the empowerment of individual teachers, the local teacher associations were stronger than ever, confident in their abilities, and flush with a newly energized generation of future leaders.

The government never abandoned its arrogant persona but it clearly reflected hard upon the fact that the public, by a margin of between two and three to one, backed teachers in a two-week illegal strike. That sober reflection resulted in the strike of 2005 having a much wider, political impact. The Liberals had assumed that they could crush the BCTF by stripping teachers of most of their bargaining rights. The arrogance of power, though, had led them to make perhaps the biggest political miscalculation of their years in government. Their intransigence had united the labour movement like nothing since the Solidarity days of the early 1980s. By treating teachers with disdain for two weeks, they had created a political force whose power was unpredictable. Their conclusion: get labour fights off the public agenda for the next election and the 2010 Olympics.

Within two months of the end of the strike, the government revealed a complete reversal in its approach to public-sector bargaining. In
December, Finance Minister Carole Taylor announced the government had created a $6-billion pot for public-sector wage increases. Huge numbers of public employees would be without contracts by March 31, 2006, with nearly 90% of public-sector contracts up for renewal. The government seemed desperate to avoid any repeat of the teachers’ strike fiasco and offered substantial early signing bonuses and bonuses for signing contracts that expired after 2010.

The Internet and international coverage of the teachers’ strike demonstrated how the fight against neo-liberalism and corporate globalization can itself become global. Jinny Sims stated: “Our public education system is the last frontier of the privateers. For me the fight has to go beyond Canada, it has to go international, and we have to put energy into that international fight because we can't take this agenda on by ourselves.” By taking on and largely succeeding against a government that seemed all-powerful, BC teachers inspired many to believe this fight can be won.

All of the conditions were there for a successful action. But without the profound unity of the members, the clear and strong direction of the leadership, the hard work and contributions of the Federation's officers and staff, and the unwavering support of teacher allies; this action would never have had the impact that it did on the province. The members got strength from the leadership, the leadership from the members. It was in every sense of the word truly a collective action. And it was successful.
The BCTF commissioned Murray Dobbin
to write this history of the BCTF job action.

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