

## *Introduction*

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### **On Strike!**

Workers have one real power – the power to withdraw their own labour. This is a risky move. Individual workers have much to lose by striking: personal economic security, increased stress, even facing abuse on the picketline. Just the same organized collective action can have powerful progressive outcomes. Very often the only way to move an employer or to enact a progressive social change is through collective action.

Over the past several months here in British Columbia we have been witness to public school teachers taking a heroic stance against a provincial government that appears intent on dismantling public education. Teachers went out on strike as a collective pressure tactic, but it is not simply about wages or benefits. For well over a decade BC's professional teachers have been fighting a struggle in support of a fully funded public education system that meets the needs of all students. There is a clear connection between a teacher's working conditions and the learning conditions for a student.

Teachers in BC have faced a government that demeans and dismisses their labour, their value, and

their contribution to society. BC Premier Christy Clark closed an inflammatory press conference by claiming that teachers were making unreasonable demands for an extra day off and unlimited massages. Aside from being patently wrong, Ms Clark's pronouncements deliberately trivialized teachers: implying that the issue was simply one of back rubs and free time: if only that were the case. The real issue relates to overcrowded, underfunded classrooms, the removal of specialist non-enrolling support teachers, the slow dismantling of BC's public education system.

A tentative deal has finally been reached between the teachers and the provincial government. Irrespective of the outcome this teachers' strike, like many other public sector labour disputes, is about more than basic economic conditions: it's about the type of society that we wish to live in. The end of the teachers' strike won't end the provincial government's drive to privatize the education system. It does, however, provide a brief breathing space and an opportunity to push harder for an education system based upon learning, citizenship, and democratic practice.