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Op-Eds

BC teachers need our support

“On the importance of education generally we may remark it is as necessary as the light, it should be as common as water, and as free as air.”
- Egerton Ryerson, founding father of public education in Canada, 1846

As most of us head for work this morning we will likely walk, drive, or cycle by a public school, but unlike most days, that school will be closed. Teachers are walking the picket line today because they are fighting for the first-class education system we all need. This is not their fight alone, nor should it be.

We should actually thank our lucky stars that we have teachers who will give up their pay cheques for their belief that our children deserve the best education we can offer. Those picket lines show that the government is failing on this important front.

A major cause of this dispute lies squarely in Victoria. Its roots go back to a decision by then B.C. Liberal Education Minister Christy Clark to rip out of teachers’ collective agreement all the language that protected children’s learning conditions, including class size and composition.

This action was ruled illegal by the courts. But rather than sit down and solve the problem, the government set out to provoke another strike and legislated teachers back to work. Back in court, those actions were also ruled illegal. The judge went further this time and ordered the government to

reinstate the language that was critical to protecting quality education for our children. The government has again refused.

Today the issue of quality education is back at the bargaining table. And this time Christy Clark and the B.C. Liberal government must do the right thing --- sit down and negotiate a fair and reasonable collective agreement that includes the critical issue of better supports for all students.

Are teachers frustrated and angry? Damn right. Wouldn't you be? After all, teachers and support staff deal with the government's failure every day. The result is not a poorer quality widget off an assembly line somewhere, it is children who pay the price --- and it is far too high. Teachers and support staff not only see the consequences, they feel them. But they are also dedicated to their students and determined to fix the problems.

And if children are paying the price today, society is paying the price tomorrow. Public education is the oxygen that makes a democratic society work. The big promise we all make to every child is that no matter who they are or where they come from, they get the same chance to be healthy, to learn, to succeed and to participate in a knowledgeable and critical way in the day to day life of our province.

Our entire economic future depends on public education. Unless we have a highly educated, highly skilled workforce we will fail miserably in creating good jobs and strong industries. We all look at our children and know our dreams for their success have never been more tied to their ability to get a good education.

The B.C. labour movement is standing with the B.C. Teachers' Federation because they are fighting for all of us. Demonstrations of solidarity with teachers are more important now than ever. We are calling on our members, and all British Columbians, to bolster the picket lines to ensure teachers know they are not standing alone.

I also invite everyone who supports a fully funded quality public education system to join together today in Vancouver at 6 pm at Canada Place and send a loud and clear message to the Liberal government to start respecting teachers and supporting children.

Premier Clark, in 2002 you said the government should be “building a sustainable system that makes decisions based on what children need. And after all, I don't think that's too much to ask of politicians.”

There is no need to let this dispute enter the summer and stretch into the fall. You have a mandate from the people of British Columbia to sit down, negotiate in good faith, and end this dispute.

Jim Sinclair
President, B.C. Federation of Labour