

Political Activist/Professional

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Two weeks ago, on October 27th, the UBC Faculty Association passed a motion to contribute \$5,000 to the Federation of Post-Secondary Educators "Feed the Teachers" Fund. This was one way of responding to Madame Justice Brown's decision to freeze the BCTF's assets. This motion was the final item of business in a fairly heated meeting. I had to laugh—immediately after the vote and the motion was passed, a young faculty member stood up stormed out grumbling that "this is a professional association guys..." The insinuation was that professional associations do not get involved in political activism. Or worse, that professionals should not be political activists or union oriented.

Now, of course, this plays into Premier Campbell's sense of the professional in British Columbia at this point in time. But, the Liberals want to play on both sides of the equation. They removed the sense of professional autonomy and self-governance that teachers (ought to) have in a profession **AND** designated teaching as an essential service, thereby removing the right to job action or activism that teachers have in a union. Hence, we are forced to make a false choice between professionalism and political activism. "Professionals don't act this way..." is what we heard over and over, since the Liberals designated education an essential service in 2001. Of course, this inference that **activism or unionism** and professionalism are incompatible goes back quite a ways, and at least back to the years when Larry Kuehn was President of the BCTF in the 1980s.

Now, this roundtable was convened to address the implications of the British Columbia Teachers' strike—the longest provincial-wide strike in BC history. Besides the fact that the strike "broke the **pattern** of passive **acceptance** of unilateral imposed contracts," as an astute teacher put it, **and** besides the fact that the strike woke up and galvanized the labour movement in BC, **and** placed the realities of working and learning conditions in public education on every front page and dinner table—in addition to this, the strike demonstrated that we can be—we have to be—professionals and political activists at the same time. We do not have to accept the false choice that Gordon Campbell is giving us. So, if you thought this strike was only about working and learning conditions for students and teachers (which it was), you missed an important point. As our BCTF President, Jinny Sims, reminded us about the strike: "This is a political protest.... sometimes some laws are just so bad that you have to stand up and say 'no, we're not going to accept that.'" She said, "We are taking a stand against a law that is so unjust that it attacks rights that people in Canada have fought for for years and years." That's one of the things that the teachers and the BCTF taught us.

So, on behalf of all the sponsors and organizers of this event, welcome!!!