

## Reflections on the Strike

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Two weeks that shook our world. That's what the teachers' strike was. But is our world any different the day after the strike ended than it was on October 6? To be honest, I'm not sure. The Ready Report offered some important economic and some political gains. Like the Surrey Teacher's Associations' nine reasons to vote no, I would agree that the Ready Report left much to be desired.

But my comments here are about the significance of the teachers strike as seen through the eyes of a parent and university-based research who was actively engaged in organizing a variety of strike support activities. Rather than rehearsing what went wrong I want to talk bit about what went right and how as people concerned about public education –as students, as teachers, as support staff, as parents, grandparents and community members- we can build upon this experience in such a way as to ensure that the arbitrary use of legislative power is stopped once and for all.

It has been my experience as a parent that has been the single most important factor pushing me to become involved in supporting public education and the people who try to make the system work. I have served on Parent Advisory Councils in variety of capacities, on School Planning Councils (first at Queen Elizabeth Elementary and currently at U. Hill Secondary) and a term as an executive member on the District Parent Advisory Council in Vancouver. Like many other parents I have done all the types of volunteer activities that turn up; from driving on field trips; to fund raising, to hosting lunch time programs; to speaking in classrooms on issues from my university research. In my capacity as a university-based researcher and educator my work has focused on issues of social inequality/equality and the way that public education can be modified to make a difference that counts.

As a parent pulled into the realm of school politics as an advocate for my own and other children I have marveled at the way our society claims to value education and then acts in ways that actually undermines education.

In 1998 the then NPA dominated school board decided to readjust a staffing problem mid-year by laying off 400 teachers to remove a 100 jobs. At my sons' school this translated into the layoff of about three quarters of that elementary school's staff. As you might well understand a crowd turned out at the Parent Advisory Council meeting that night. We decided to manifest our concern with an early morning district-wide demonstration on the grounds of the new P3 school board offices. More than 300 parents and children turned up.

The next year my wife and I found ourselves in a meeting with a Learning Assistance teacher and the school principal. The topic was what could be done to support his

learning needs. I found myself speechless as the principal, in what was in his mind supportive advice, directed us to hire the support we needed as they really wouldn't be able to do much for him. "Isn't this a public education system in which the learning needs of every child is met?" I naively asked. Well, apparently not.

That was under a nominally supportive provincial government that had introduced some significant changes to public education, most notably agreeing to class size and composition clauses in teachers' collective agreements. With the election of a new provincial government in 2001 things went from poor to very bad.

Along with other Vancouver PAC parents I joined with the non-partisan Save Our Schools campaign in 2002 that mobilized nearly 14,000 people to sign a petition in support of public education. Here we found ourselves in a situation that a legislated contract with teachers combined with changes in the Medical Services Plan had transferred significant cuts to school board budgets and the result in Vancouver was a 25 million dollar cut.

As parents we drew upon our volunteer networks, our parking lot and school yard acquaintances and built a movement that based itself on the premise that every child deserved a real chance to learn. We were careful to avoid partisan politics while recognizing that this is of course political; to argue otherwise is to pretend that one does not have a perspective or a position.

What we were doing in Vancouver was mirrored across the province and, I would suggest, played a significant role in shaping the very broad based and effective support for teachers that we saw during the teachers' strike.

The October Strike is notable from a parent perspective for a number of reasons.

First it was supported. Even though our 'official parent voice,' the BC Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils proclaimed loudly (on October 19) that there had been no crisis in education until the start of the teachers' strike on October 7; parents seem to have disagreed. According to a BCCPAC executive member nearly 500 emails were received by parents critical of the BCCPAC press conference. On the support blog that I ran during the teachers strike I have posted several such letters from PAC Chairs who critiqued the claims that irreparable harm was being committed on our children.

Second it demonstrated the central importance of the relationships between teachers and parents in the care of our children. Many parents I spoke to during the strike emphasized that the relationship between teachers and parents is a critical one that needed to be supported and maintained. It is unfortunate that our provincial parent voice has placed some much energy into vilify teachers and their representatives; from resolutions focusing on teacher misconduct, through ones aimed at reducing the rights of teachers and support staff to engage in free and fair collective bargaining, the provincial voice of parents has spent a lot of time highlighting the negative aspects of parent/teacher relations.

Third it had the possibility to go longer. From west side parents holding morning breakfasts to inner city parents holding barbeques to north coast parent standing in hurricane force winds, parents and members of the wider community were standing there side-by-side with teachers. And this represents one of the single most important developments of the October Strike. The teachers' cause was one that was in fact political. It was political in the sense that it was a strike in support of democratic principles that involved not only the right to collective bargaining, but –and I think more importantly- was about the central role that access to effective public education plays in a democratic society. And here, parents from right to left, from wealth to poverty, from rural to urban, found common cause with teachers. This was both a classic labour/employer struggle and a democratic rights struggle.

If I have a criticism it is more likely to be laid at the feet of those in the House of Labour who pulled the plug on the teachers' strike. The demobilization of labour before the vote on the Ready Report sent a clear signal to teachers and the rest of us that it was time to stop. The focus of our struggle for real democracy must expand to include organizations of labour and community. Here as well the teachers' principled and radical approach to democratic practice could be held up as an example for all of us. At each step of the way the union locals of the BCTF met, discussed, and voted. This was no strike that could be ended by a Jack Munro style meeting on a Premier's veranda.

The teachers have, with apologies, taught us a lesson. It is that working people can stand together collectively and hold accountable those who rule with the interests of a minority in mind. In the struggle for real democracy we do need to take risks. The teachers stood up and held the government at bay. As a parent I see my role to stand beside my children's teachers. As a university professor I have a responsibility to make sure that these debates and ideas are given a place to be heard. To be silent is to agree with the arbitrary use of legislative power.