

June 9, 2006

B.C. teachers vote to strike

By CAMILLE BAINS

VANCOUVER (CP) - British Columbia teachers voted 85.2 per cent Friday in favour of going on strike in the fall if they are unable to negotiate a new contract with school employers.

The strike vote was taken amid contract talks that have been hung up over wage demands.

More than 30,000 teachers voted.

The B.C. Teachers Federation has been seeking a 24 per cent wage increase over four years, while the Public School Employers Association has been offering eight per cent over four years.

Teachers say that's not enough to keep their wages competitive with what their counterparts earn in Ontario and Alberta.

Federation president Jenny Sims says the vote sends a strong message to the government that teachers want a significant wage increase.

The two sides have been working toward a June 30 deadline for getting a deal in order for the 38,000 teachers to qualify for a share of bonus money offered by the provincial government.

The teachers also want improved benefits and increased professional autonomy.

The employer says the union's proposal would increase the cost of public education by \$3 billion over three years.

The union says that figure is inflated but has not provided its own detailed costing.

The employers' association says its offer is in line with other public-sector pay increases this year for nurses, doctors and health-care workers.

If the parties can reach a deal before the contract expires June 30, teachers will receive a similar signing bonus to that given other public servants who recently reached deals - about \$3,700 each.

If a new contract isn't signed by the time schools reopen after the summer break, teachers would walk out in the second major shutdown of schools in less than a year, affecting about 600,000 students.

Contract talks are slated to continue Monday,

In February, Premier Gordon Campbell trumpeted a \$6-billion investment to negotiate public-sector contracts this year with teachers, hospital workers, doctors and nurses.

Most other large public-sector unions have already signed agreements with the government.

B.C. teachers and the provincial government have a history of contentious relations.

Last October, teachers staged an illegal two-week strike after voting 88.4 per cent in favour of setting up picket lines to protest the government's legislation that freezes their wages until the end of June.

Teachers had demanded a 15 per cent wage increase over three years while the government offered zero as part of its public-sector wage policy.

Teachers also wanted a cap on class size and a restoration of the number of teacher-librarians, ESL teachers and counsellors to 2002 levels, when funding cuts reduced resources.

B.C. teachers have been subjected to imposed contracts four times since 1993.

The Liberals are the only government in Canada to declare education an essential service, limiting teachers' job action during contract negotiations.

An essential service designation for education means teachers can stage limited job action only after the Labour Relations Board rules what is acceptable.

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