

## Why Burnaby Teachers Are Taking Job Action

Many people may not be aware of why Burnaby teachers are taking Job Action at this time. The Job Action is in response to the fact that negotiations, both at the local and provincial levels, in order to conclude a new Collective Agreement, are not going well at all. Teachers hope that by taking Job Action, the employer, and the Provincial Government, will get the message that teachers deserve to be treated respectfully and good faith bargaining needs to happen!!

At the provincial table, the employer has set a "net zero mandate". This means that there is no additional money to bargain any items. In other words, teachers would have to give up Collective Agreement provisions that cost money, in order to achieve other provisions that cost money. To workers, this is known as "bargaining with yourself". This concept is not supported by workers, including Burnaby teachers, because it disadvantages one group of workers, in order to achieve benefits for another group of workers. A trade-off of this kind cannot be supported by a Union that must represent all of its members. In addition, inflation is not at zero, so, a "net zero mandate" is actually a "sub-zero mandate". If an employer comes to the bargaining table with no money, then that employer must be questioned as to how serious they are about good faith bargaining!

The employer, at the provincial table, is also not willing to negotiate a new split of issues; that is, which issues will be bargained at the provincial table and which issues will be bargained at the local table. At the present time, the number of issues which can be bargained at the local table is very limited. As teacher contracts were bargained locally prior to 1994, teacher locals, in districts around the province, have differing provisions in their Collective Agreements. These differing provisions make it very difficult to bargain issues provincially and then be successful in addressing bargaining issues that are of importance to teachers in various locals or districts. In other words, bargaining for a whole province of teachers makes it impossible to address many issues that affect teachers in a limited number of locals. Although it may not be possible to return to local bargaining for all issues, there is an urgency to address many bargaining issues at the local level. Teachers in Burnaby hope that the Job Action will move forward the discussion about the split of issues. Many months of bargaining have gone by so far, and it has been distressing to see how little the employer, at the provincial table, has been willing to negotiate, regarding the split of issues.

The fact that limited negotiations, in the area of the split of issues, have happened at the provincial table, has seriously limited what is possible to bargain at the local table. Teachers in Burnaby are very disappointed that so few of their bargaining issues have been addressed at the local table.

At the current time, our education system in British Columbia is one of the best in the world, despite the cuts in funding that have occurred in recent years. A Burnaby teacher once said to me that “you can’t do more with less; you can’t even do the same with less; you can only do less with less”. Burnaby teachers are extremely concerned about what cuts need to be made when education funding becomes less and less. The government is correct in saying that more money goes into education each year, but that still results in inadequate funding, if the cost of everything goes up more than the increased funding can cover. Teachers in Burnaby value public education and the opportunities it provides to our students who will be our future. We, as teachers, must take action when negotiations are not proceeding successfully to show that we support our bargaining objectives that support a properly funded high quality public education system.

Our former Premier, Gordon Campbell, once said, when justifying a substantial raise in pay for government officials, that if you don’t pay well, then you won’t attract the best people to the positions. I have to agree with him. If we are not willing to pay teachers in British Columbia salaries that are comparable to other jurisdictions in Canada, then talented individuals will not choose to go into the teaching profession. Already, the number of students applying to enter teaching programs at the universities in B.C. has declined substantially over the last decade. In some of those programs, there are few or no male students willing to go into teaching. It is sad to say, that recently teachers in Saskatchewan argued not to include the pay of B.C. teachers in a calculation to determine what their salary increase would be. The salary of B.C. teachers was so low, that it would lower the pay increase that Saskatchewan teachers would receive. B.C. teachers used to be among the highest paid teachers in Canada. Now, we are among the lowest paid teachers in Canada, and the lowest paid in Western Canada. With the low salary and political climate in B.C., it’s not hard to see why some of the most talented students might avoid teaching as their profession of choice. Teachers have taught all those who go into the workforce, including the politicians. If the young are our most valuable resource and our hope for the future, why is the government unwilling to invest properly in that future? Ask yourself that question and you may begin to see why Burnaby teachers are involved in this Job Action.

On a more positive note, when the Job Action begins on September 6, Burnaby teachers will be in their classrooms doing what they love most – teaching kids. Teachers will be available to speak with parents and students, regarding student progress. Hopefully, negotiations, both at the local and provincial tables, will be productive and successful, so that we can continue to provide one of the best public education systems in the world. The students are our future and they deserve the best!