

## Surrey Teachers' Strike 1974

BC LABOUR  
HERITAGE  
CENTRE

# Surrey Teachers' Strike 1974

by Peter Thomson

The early '70s were heady times in Surrey education. The School Board had, by October 1973, voluntarily agreed to observe the BCTF recommended class-size limits. Staff committees were springing up and innovative practices were encouraged. There was a new, and we hoped still education-friendly, NDP government that many of us had helped to elect. Optimism reigned!

Of course, there was reaction brewing. In November 1973 Surrey elected a more conservative board replacing the left-leaning "For All Surrey Team." Our salary arbitration award produced a 10.2% general increase and scale shortening in category six. It was not out of line with other district but when combined with growing enrollment and the agreed-to class-size limits, Surrey's property tax bill looked ready for a hefty increase. Not a happy prospect for a new Tory trustee!



The provincial government soon began to feel financial and political heat, so Minister of Education Eileen Dailly called on all trustees to achieve some economies. At the same time the premier mentioned the problem of rising administrative costs. Those pleas became the Surrey board's cue. In early February 1974 it announced that it would not submit a budget based on student needs, but rather one driven by taxpayer wants. In order to keep the mill rate down, Surrey was to have larger classes, and all its vice-principal positions were to be eliminated!

All our buttons were pushed. On February 13, the STA leadership met with the trustees in Liaison Committee and, expressing dismay, demanded an explanation and the restoration of a budget based on needs. The board refused and blamed the province. The STA leadership then caucused in an extraordinary executive meeting and decided to call an emergency general meeting for the following day to vote on its recommendation to strike on February 15. We returned to the liaison meeting and Lloyd Edwards, our president, announced our decision and invited trustees to come with us to Victoria. The board declined.

The following 48 hours were a frantic blur of activity for Surrey teachers. First the general meeting call had to be phoned out to teachers and schools, a meeting

***“The STA leadership  
... decided to call an  
emergency general  
meeting... to vote on  
its recommendation  
to strike on  
February 15.”***

place had to be booked, and buses to meet us on the Island arranged on short notice.

The Valentine's Day General Meeting at Queen Elizabeth Secondary School was attended by 1,000 of the 1,400 STA members. BCTF President Jim MacFarlan witnessed and was amazed by the turnout and the outcome. The meeting first heard the executive's liaison report. Then President Edwards moved the strike motion, and Gerry Powlik, a new secondary vice-principal, seconded. That sealed it. It was clear the administrators were on side. The motion carried with fewer than five dissenting votes.

Feverish activity continued as all in attendance left quickly to phone colleagues who had missed the meeting and to make arrangements for the trek. Doris Hahn, learning conditions chairperson, remembers painting protest signs at the STA office late into the evening. By 09:00 Friday, Surrey teachers boarded ferries for Victoria, so many that only the earliest made the first ferry because of overcrowding!

In Victoria we massed on the legislature lawn and then were invited to meet in an auditorium of the museum next door. Some of us crowded into that small hall to hear a condescending message from government delivered by Surrey's MLA and Provincial Secretary Ernie Hall. What followed was to become the best remembered scene of the day.

Wes Janzen, a past BCTF president and Surrey principal, leaped up onto the stage and confronted Ernie, reminding him loudly that many teachers had helped to put him into office. Hall told him to cool it. "Don't tell me to



cool it,” shouted Janzen, whipping out his NDP card. “Here’s my card and I’ll tear it up if that’s what you’re going to do!” Perhaps it was then the government began to realise the serious nature of our case. There were some promises to review the budget and the meeting broke up.

As the rally was dispersing, Jim MacFarlan and Ralph Sundby, who had accompanied us, were passing outside Eileen Dailly’s office when she signalled them to come in and asked MacFarlan to speak with Premier Dave Barrett. Barrett asked MacFarlan what it would take to get his people off the lawn. The response was, “We want a reduction in class sizes of 2% for each of three years.” Barrett balked, so MacFarlan took from his pocket the 1972 NDP election brochure that promised teachers staged class-size reductions. Barrett countered with 1% per year and



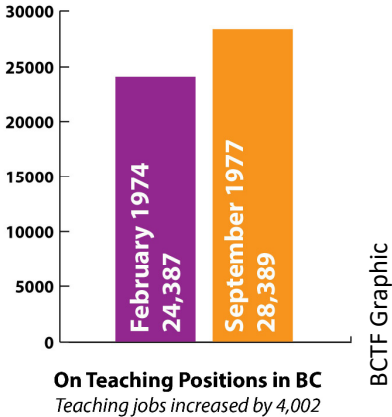
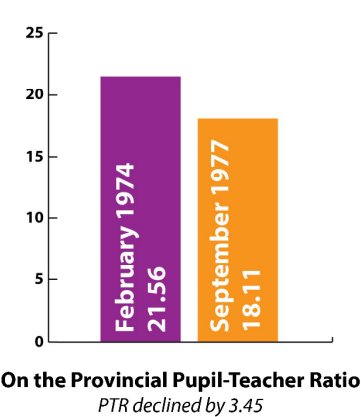
MacFarlan raised that to 1.5% and so a deal was struck. A few days later Education Minister Dailly made that class-size reduction commitment in the legislature.

Three to four thousand teaching jobs province-wide, a 20% increase, came from that day even though the government later partially welched on the deal. In Surrey the board stubbornly refused to re-submit a needs budget, so Surrey's share of the deal was diminished – but the vice principals' jobs were saved. By any measure that strike was a resounding success. It was one of the most significant events in the modern history of the BCTF; a watershed. The job action showed teachers' firm dedication to quality public education.

Originally printed in *Teacher* Newsmagazine  
May/June 2000, Vol. 12, No. 7

***“By any measure that strike  
was a resounding success. It  
was one of the most  
significant events in the  
modern history of the  
BCTF; a watershed.”***

**BCTF deal resulting from  
Surrey teachers' 1974 protest made a big impact**



## Who we are

The BC Labour Heritage Centre Society preserves, documents and presents the rich history of working people in British Columbia. The Society engages in partnerships and projects that help define and express the role that work and workers have played in the evolution of social policy and its impact on the present and future shaping of the province.

## Contact Us

BC Labour Heritage Centre

#301—8988 Fraserton Court

Burnaby, BC V5J 5H8

PH: 604-419-0400

[www.labourheritagecentre.ca](http://www.labourheritagecentre.ca)

[info@labourheritagecentre.ca](mailto:info@labourheritagecentre.ca)

BC LABOUR  
HERITAGE  
CENTRE



BC Labour Heritage  
Centre



@BC\_LHC

**The BC Labour Heritage Centre and the following groups  
contributed to this project.**



**The Boag Foundation**



**BCLHC Sponsors:** Bargaining Council of BC Building Trade Unions • BC Federation of Labour • BC Government and Service Employees' Union • BC Teachers' Federation • CUPE BC • LiUNA Local 1611 • Movement of United Professionals • United Steelworkers District 3 and National Office • United Food and Commercial Workers Local 1518