

1981 Terrace teachers' strike



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School's out in Terrace teacher's six day strike in 1981 helped paved the way to full bargaining rights

by Janet Nicol

British Columbia's public school teachers didn't achieve the right to strike until 1987—but that didn't stop them from walking off the job. In fact teachers across the province have engaged in several disputes since the BC Teacher's Federation was established in 1917, all playing an essential role toward gaining full collective bargaining rights. Among these actions was the teachers' strike in Terrace in 1981. It was the fourth—but not final—time BC teachers would participate in an “illegal” walk out.

Tensions had been growing between the Terrace District Teachers' Association (TDTA) and the nine-member school board in early 1981. About 337 teachers worked in schools enrolling 3,800 students within Terrace and other communities in northwestern BC. Local teacher associations (which included principals) only negotiated wages with their school boards and if they could not reach an agreement by a set deadline, the matter went to binding arbitration. School boards were not required to negotiate any working condition items with teachers.

That fateful spring a popular middle school principal, Tom Hamakawa, was transferred and demoted to classroom teacher by the district superintendent Frank Hamilton. This disciplinary action was “the catalyst that brought the whole thing to the surface,” Wayne Wyatt, President of the TDTA, told the *Vancouver Sun*. “We want a decent policy established on how this sort of thing should be handled in the future.” The staff supported the principal “very strongly,” Wyatt also said. Three hundred students were sympathetic too, walking out of class and marching to the school board office in protest.

COVER: representatives of School Action Committee demonstrate before board transfer hearing. Courtesy BCTF Archives.

Roy Greening, an elementary school principal in the district, had received the same treatment. His case was under appeal and the TDTA was watching closely. If the board had acted fairly, the principal would have known the reasons for the demotion and transfer within a reasonable time period. Instead Greening was notified minutes before his appeal hearing.

Several other teacher complaints had been accumulating and taken together, these grievances were creating a united local. Teachers needed a contract with specific language on hiring, transfer and reporting procedures—and a grievance process.

In a display of solidarity with the two principals and because of other complaints, teachers staged a walk out on May 6, forfeiting a day's pay. The TDTA organized a study session so teachers could discuss a plan of action. Members agreed they would demand the board rescind the involuntary transfers of the principals. They also voted overwhelming in favour of a "work-to-rule" campaign.

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Terrace gains major advance

The dispute over personnel practices in Terrace has ended with a major victory for teachers: agreement on a contract covering personnel practices, and containing a grievance procedure — the first B.C. teacher contract to do so.

Says BCTF President Al Blakey: "This is the most momentous development in our bargaining rights campaign."

The contract was signed by the school board on May 26. Teachers ratified the agreement on May 24, shortly after it had been agreed to by negotiators for the two sides.

The agreement ended an eight-day work-to-rule by the district's 320 teachers and averted rotating strikes that were to have begun May 25.

Blakey, who went to Terrace several times after the issue broke in late April, was impressed by the "quantity and quality of participation" of Terrace teachers, "most of whom had never attended a general meeting until this issue broke."

"The sense of togetherness, of mutual respect and of common purpose illustrated a new kind of collective relationship among teachers that is quite new and beneficial and a credit to the profession," he told the Executive Committee on May 23 upon returning from Terrace.

"Terrace teachers are justly proud of their new dignity."

And what they have achieved in Terrace is remarkable. Some districts have signed contracts with their school boards covering some non-money items such as class size and other learning conditions. But none of these agreements contained a grievance procedure with binding arbitration as the final step.

What is more remarkable, it appears that the intervention of the Ministry of Education broke the deadlock in Terrace and paved the way for a signed contract. Deputy Education Minister Jim Carter and Acting Assistant Deputy Minister Glen Wall spent a considerable amount of time in Terrace in the week before the contract was signed, talking to both sides.

Disaffection with the district's personnel practices had been festering for years. Things came to a head in April

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Front page of BCTF Newsletter, May 28, 1981. Courtesy BCTF Archives.

“So far the board has failed to respond to the teachers’ concerns,” a TDTA representative explained. “This further action is necessary.”

Parents wanted a resolution too. When the school board called a meeting on May 12, more than 50 parents, teachers and students filled the room. The doors were locked after many more people tried to enter. Standing outside, they began yelling and banging on the door. A panicked trustee called the police. According to the Terrace *Daily Herald*, when officers arrived, the crowd cheered and “soon the police were banging on the door to tell the administration it should get the board to move the meeting to a larger facility so that everyone could be heard.”

Before the work to rule campaign started, TDTA members telephoned parents to explain the action. Teachers would not supervise students during recess and lunch, parents learned, or donate time for extra-curricular activities. The TDTA also distributed an information bulletin, urging parents to share their concern about the dispute with their trustee. Most parents supported the teachers and some even offered to help supervise in the schools, according to the *Daily Herald*.

The TDTA also took out a newspaper advertisement addressing the treatment of the two principals. The ad posed several questions about the board’s motives, such as: “Could this be educationally sound or simply convenient?”

The competency of the school board trustees was questioned by the TDTA, especially after the chairperson entered some schools and ordered staff room materials taken down from bulletin boards. “She is there to set policies, not to give orders to teachers,” Wyatt told the *Daily Herald*.

Teachers were also frustrated with the pace of contract talks. The board accused the association of infringing on management rights during negotiations, Wyatt recalls in a recent interview, part of an Oral History Project.

“As an employee, you didn’t have the right to question the decision of the upper management,” Wyatt says, “or

in this case, the School Board, and if you were to question that, it was like heresy.”

Applying further pressure, the TDTA announced a plan to start rotating strikes. The weekend before the impending walk out, the board agreed to meet. Deputy education minister Jim Carter was also on hand to help both sides reach an agreement. As a result, the teachers’ main demands were settled, along with a verbal promise by the board to continue negotiations on additional issues, such as class size. When Monday, May 25 rolled around, instead of rotating strikes, teachers were back in the classroom. The work to rule action was also called off.

Tense relations between the board and teachers persisted however, as issues including the principals’ appeals, were still being contested. The *Daily Herald* wrote an editorial in early June supporting teachers “in their fight to have fair hearings for the two principals who were demoted and transferred.” The editorial also demanded a full public inquiry into the board and the district administration.

“Most parents supported the teachers and some even offered to help supervise in the schools ...”

Teacher negotiators were not getting results on unfinished contract issues. When Greening’s demotion and transfer was upheld at a review hearing on June 9, the TDTA was prompted to take strike action, according to teacher negotiator (and later local President) Glenn Grieve.

“I don’t think it’s any different than any other strike, anywhere, anytime,” Wyatt says, recalling the six day walk out that began on the last day of regular classes—Friday, June 12. “There’s two sides, and there’s a huge divide in between the two.”



Teachers meet at school district offices to begin work to rule
Courtesy BCTF Archives.

The board called the strike “shameful” and “illegal.” Trustees refused to bargain until teachers went back to work. The local chamber of commerce was also unsympathetic. “Predominately the feeling was that we should all be in jail,” Wyatt recalls.

“There are No Strings on Me,” a young male teacher’s sign read when the picketing began, referencing the board’s accusation that the BCTF was behind the strike. He was among the 220 teachers in Terrace and Thornhill off the job. (About 117 teachers in the outlying areas were not involved.) Another female striker was captured in a newspaper photograph wearing a cowboy hat and sign that read: “If you care about students in Terrace— Negotiate.” The message on her female colleague’s sign read: “We Deserve Courtesy, Concern, Consideration.”

The TDTA had another demand—the resignation of all school board members. Striking member Greg Houlden told the

Vancouver Sun “If this board were to tender its resignation, I’m certain the teachers would go back to work.”

The board decided to hire Siedo Tzogoelt, a professional negotiator, despite public criticism of the cost to the taxpayer. Tzogoelt’s “outsider” status was effective however, especially after he told trustees their refusal to bargain during a strike was unreasonable. He also suggested to teacher negotiators that firing board members wasn’t helpful either.

After six days on strike, both parties signed and ratified an agreement. Teachers returned to the classroom Monday, June 22, just before summer break. Among the resolutions was a revised process for the two principals’ grievance appeal. (A month later, an inquiry resulted in the restoration of the positions of Greening and Hamakawa, vindicating the two men—and the TDTA.) Teachers also won a Personnel Practices agreement which included contract language on promotions, demotions and transfers.

“This is the most momentous development in our bargaining rights campaign,” BCTF President Al Blakey proudly told the media.

Buoyed by the Terrace teachers’ success, locals across the province engaged in a wide range of public relations, political action and job action later that same year. Terrace teachers had proven anything was possible. Many locals were able to negotiate a range of working conditions items into their agreement. Even though the momentum of this province-wide campaign was dampened by the government restraint budget of 1982, the Terrace strike and settlement was an important step for BC teachers on the road to gaining full bargaining rights six years later.

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BC Labour Heritage Centre
#301—8988 Fraserton Court
Burnaby, BC V5J 5H8
PH: 604-419-0400
www.labourheritagecentre.ca
info@labourheritagecentre.ca

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