

**Taking parent involvement to a new level:  
A parents' reflection on the October 2005 teachers strike**

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British Columbia's longest lasting province wide teacher's strike marks a turning point in the relation between parents and teachers. Throughout the province parents and other community members organized ad hoc support activities. Politicians, union leaders and pundits alike seemed baffled by the support—perhaps disbelieving might be a more accurate characterization. But, from the vantage of parents involved in their children's schools, the support was not surprising. We are witnesses to the process of radical change that is underway in our schools and, for many of us, it is a change for the worse. Parents are, of course, not isolated from the wider events of our day. We are also aware of the radical changes being made to healthcare, social services, and government services and practices in general. Since 2001 our provincial government has exercised its legislative authority in a manner that hasn't been witnessed in British Columbia since the 1983 Social Credit government of Bill Bennett. The Bennett government's actions resulted in a province-wide shutdown of public services. Today there is a growing sense that the arbitrary use of legislative authority is an affront to democratic practice and a growing willingness to support our public services. My comments here are about the significance of the teachers' strike as seen through the eyes of a parent and university-based researcher who was actively engaged in organizing a variety of strike support activities. Rather than rehearsing what may have gone wrong I want to focus on 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

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build upon this experience in such a way as to ensure that the arbitrary use of legislative power is stopped once and for all.

My experience as a parent 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 a variety of capacities, on School Planning Councils (first at Queen Elizabeth Elementary and currently at U. Hill Secondary) and 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: driving on field trips, fund raising, hosting lunch time programs, speaking in classrooms on issues from my university research, and many, many more such activities that contribute to the life of our schools. 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 Non-Partisan Association (NPA) dominated school board decided to readjust a staffing problem mid-year by laying off 400 teachers to remove 100 jobs. At my sons' school this translated into the layoff of about three quarters of that elementary school's staff. As one may well imagine 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 (Public-Private Partnership) 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—what could be done to support our son’s 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 are met?” I naively asked.

Well, apparently not.

That was under a nominally supportive provincial government that had introduced some important 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. The result in Vancouver was a 25 million dollar cut to an already stretched budget.

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 in October, 2005.

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 (<http://www.npweblog.ca>) that I ran during the teachers strike I posted several such letters from PAC Chairs who critiqued the claims that irreparable harm was being done to 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 so much energy in vilifying 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. While respectfully acknowledging differences between teachers and parents there are important avenues of common ground upon which meaningful discussion and cooperative action can take place. In Vancouver DPAC, for example, we have made an

effort of the past several years to meet regularly with the executives of Vancouver teacher unions as well as with the leadership of the other partner groups.

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 made clear that government policy was not in the best interests of public education. 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 and accept the erosion of our children's education.