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Education minister 'looking for agreement with CUPE'

BURNABY – Despite the breakdown of talks, new BC Education Minister Peter Fassbender told the Vancouver Sun newspaper yesterday, “it’s early days for me to try to comment on the current state of negotiations. What I think we need to do is let the process continue to proceed as it has. I’m not going to get into a debate about those negotiations at this stage. But I do know that we’re looking for an agreement with CUPE as well, and the negotiators are working very hard to get there.”

Negotiations at the provincial level broke down completely in April after six months of fruitless bargaining. There have been no talks since.

CUPE BC K-12 Presidents’ Council president Colin Pawson said, “the minister is correct, negotiation is the key – and CUPE remains ready and willing to engage in meaningful negotiations at any time. Our goal is a negotiated fair and reasonable contract settlement that addresses our main issues – job security and wages.”

More than 70 percent of the 27,000 CUPE K-12 workers in BC are now under a strike mandate. Thirty eight of CUPE’s K-12 locals in BC have held successful strike votes with 10 more in the offing. Virtually all of the 57 locals are expected to have completed their strike votes by the end of this month.

The strike votes have come in the wake of impasses at the provincial and local level caused by a lack of action by the provincial government. Local-by-local job actions to activate the strike mandates have already started including instituting overtime bans, holding study sessions and picketing outside of school hours. Major job action is not expected before September.

Responding to news that BC Premier Christy Clark has boosted her own political staff’s pay by 18 percent earlier this week Pawson said, “this is the same government that has denied the workers who keep our schools clean, safe and inclusive any wage increase since 2009. The average salary for our members is \$24,000 per year – compared to as much as \$230,000 from the public purse for Clark’s senior staff at a time when the government claims it has no more money for public education.”

“Instead of insisting that school boards do more and more with less and less, the priority for this government has to shift to our children and to maintaining the quality of public education. That means adequate funding for school staff and programs,” says Pawson. “These salary hikes for political staff are a slap in the face to every taxpayer who expects their hard-earned money to go towards educating our kids.”

CUPE represents education assistants, clerical staff, trades, aboriginal workers, custodians, youth and family workers, bus drivers and other classifications in 53 BC school districts.

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