

Falcon's decision is for the birds

By Paul Faoro

Health Services Minister Kevin Falcon crossed the line with his move to legislate the 3,500 striking CUPE 873 Ambulance Paramedics back to work. Minister Falcon claimed that Bill 21 was necessary because of mounting stresses on the health care system. Mr. Falcon cited burned-out ambulance managers and the growing demands of the H1N1 pandemic. Although our NDP MLAs forced the debate as long as they could, Bill 21 was rammed through the legislature—an extremely troubling development.

The BC Liberals have made history, as this is the first time a government in Canada has imposed a collective agreement on public sector employees at the same time that their union was conducting a vote on a final offer from the same government. You wouldn't think this is the kind of history a government would want to be remembered for.

I am even more angered by this legislation knowing that the Vancouver Organizing Committee for the 2010 Olympics (VANOC) had their hand in the creation of Bill 21.

It turns out that, rather than spending time polishing Olympic medals, VANOC Director of Medical Services, Dr. Mike Wilkinson, sent a memorandum to the CEO of the BC Ambulance Service, Lee Doney and other government officials about the labour dispute in the ambulance service. Dr. Wilkinson stated in his memorandum, "VANOC Medical Services (and thus the IOC) requires definitive confirmation by October 1, 2009 that all required ambulance services will be provided as planned. These services include the ability to engage the VPCs and BCAS members in full venue planning as soon as possible. This confirmation must also include a guarantee that no services during the Games will be disrupted or reduced from what has been planned." The memo further states: "if we are unable to obtain that guarantee (through either settlement of the strike or legislated détente for the Games) then VANOC will be required to initiate alternative contingency plans to avoid cancellation of the Games."

The Vancouver 2010 website says: "the Vancouver 2010 mission is to touch the soul of the nation and inspire the world by creating and delivering an extraordinary Olympic and Paralympic experience with lasting legacies." Bill 21 is not the kind of lasting legacy I think British Columbians want. I think the people at VANOC should reconsider their slogan "With Glowing Hearts." It is appalling that this unelected organization has interfered in this manner.

Bill 21 swiftly takes away the fundamental right of a union to bargain freely, which should concern every labour union member in British Columbia. With this move by government, you cannot dismiss the premise that this form of legislation may be used again. Remember, this is the same government that tried to rip up collective agreements in the health care sector. When you think that just about every provincially-funded collective agreement will expire next spring, we must be more prepared than ever to fight for the right to negotiate freely and to reach a fair and respectful settlement.

In CUPE 15, our members employed by the Vancouver School Board, Langara College, Emily Carr University, and Vancouver Coastal Health have collective agreements that expire on March 31, 2010. These groups represent almost half of our membership.

I know that over the coming days CUPE 873, CUPE British Columbia Division, and the BC Federation of Labour will examine all avenues to have Bill 21 torn up. Nothing can be as important.

Paul Faoro is president of CUPE 15, Vancouver Municipal, Education and Community Workers, and a general vice president of CUPE BC. An earlier version of this article appears in the November issue of The Members' Voice, the newsletter of CUPE 15.