

Ontario unions bury protest campaign against Harris government

Keith Jones
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The Ontario Federation of Labour has abandoned plans to organize a one-day, province-wide strike against Ontario's Tory government and has terminated a series of regional anti-Tory protests.

Elected in June 1995, the Harris Tory government has spearheaded Canadian big business's assault on the working class. It has cut billions from health care, education, and social services, slashed welfare rates by 21 percent, initiated a scheme to force welfare recipients to provide cheap labor to local governments, community organizations, and now business, and abolished restrictions on the use of scabs.

The breadth of popular opposition to these attacks and the Harris government's dependence on the trade union bureaucracy to suppress working class opposition was illustrated by last fall's province-wide teachers' strike. For two weeks 126,000 public school teachers struck to force the Tories to drop legislation that concentrates control of education policy and funding in the hands of the Education Ministry so they can impose massive cuts and tie the curriculum more closely to the needs of big business.

The Tories had calculated that the cancellation of classes for two million school children would enable it to witch-hunt the teachers. Instead, teacher picket lines and demonstrations were swelled by parents and students, and even the opinion polls of the capitalist media showed massive support for the teachers.

With the strike taking on the character of a social-political struggle, the teachers unions and the OFL leadership moved to scuttle it. They responded to a court ruling denying the Tories a strike-breaking injunction by immediately entering into talks with the government and abandoning the teachers' demands. Then, when the government refused their surrender, they called off the strike altogether.

Even before the teachers' strike, the growing opposition of the working class to the Harris Tory government had thrown the bureaucracy into crisis. For months, a faction led by the United Steelworkers USWA and the Canadian Energy and Paperworkers union had demanded that the OFL end its campaign of regional days of protest. Launched in December 1995, the days of action campaign was designed to place the OFL at the head of the anti-Tory movement, the better to restrict it to impotent protests. But the USWA and CEP bureaucrats became perturbed by the militancy of some of the protests--in Toronto protesters defied a court injunction and shut down the municipal transit system--and by the lack of prominence given to the OFL-supported New Democratic Party.

For its part, the other faction calculated that to identify the protest movement with the NDP would gravely undercut its credibility. In the minds of most Ontario workers the NDP, which held power in Ontario between 1990 and 1995, is rightly associated with massive social spending cuts and wage-cutting.

At its biennial convention, held last November only days after the conclusion of the teachers' strike, the OFL elected a Steelworker official as its president, while passing a resolution committing the OFL to hold a province-wide one-day strike sometime before the end of 1998.

Predictably, the OFL executive has now shelved this face-saving resolution. Meeting last week, it decided to end all mass protests against the Harris government and instead pour its energies into defeating the Tories at the next provincial election, which must be held by June 2000.

Significantly, the OFL campaign is directed not at returning the NDP to power, but at ousting Harris and the Tories. With support for the NDP well below 20

percent in the opinion polls, the labor bureaucracy is seeking to establish a closer relationship with the Liberals.

In a commentary published last month on the occasion of the third anniversary of the Tories' election victory, former NDP premier Bob Rae said the Tories' opponents must take their cue from Britain's Tony Blair and US President Bill Clinton and recognize that 'the paradigm has changed.' 'A program based on undoing many of the Harris changes is doomed to minority support.' Rae then went on to call 'for 'some out of the box thinking" a euphemism for an NDP-Liberal electoral alliance.

The truth is the Tories, Liberals and NDP are all big business parties, and while they disagree over the extent of political influence to concede to the labor bureaucracy they work in tandem against the working class.

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