

Pivotal struggle over the future of public education in Canada

Ontario teachers threaten to resume strike

Keith Jones
15 August 1998

Tens of thousands of teachers in Ontario, Canada's most populous province, are threatening to strike in coming weeks, as part of their continuing struggle against the provincial Tory government's assault on their conditions of employment and on public education as a whole.

On Monday, August 17, the 360 high school teachers employed by the Near North District School, which covers the North Bay-Nipissing region, are set to strike.

An Ontario government conciliator reported this week that negotiations between the Toronto District School Board and the Ontario Secondary School Teacher's Federation (OSSTF) have reached an impasse, meaning 7,500 Toronto-area high school teachers will be in a legal strike position in little more than two weeks. The Toronto OSSTF local, like most others across the provinces, voted massively in support of job action in a strike vote in June.

Under Bill 160, legislation passed in late 1997, the Tories have centralized control of education funding and policy in the hands of the provincial education ministry, the better to impose massive budget cuts and changes in the school curriculum tailored to meet the demands of business.

Teacher contract negotiations, on the other hand, remain decentralized, with the teacher unions negotiating with local school boards. Not only does such a collective bargaining regime serve to divide the teachers. It means that the provincial government--which under Bill 160 has become the sole arbiter of what school boards can spend and has further restricted the boards' already limited powers over curriculum, class-size, and teacher workload--is not even a party to the contract negotiations.

Claiming that the provincial government's funding policy and its decree limiting teacher preparation time leave them no choice, the school boards are demanding cuts in benefits, and in some cases wages. They are also bent on forcing high school teachers to work seven out of the eight periods in the school-day, instead of the current six. Says Liz Sandals, of the Ontario Public School Boards Association, 'I'm not sure I would characterize it as the boards doing the government's dirty work. But there's no doubt the boards are caught in the middle between the teachers and the government.'

Bill 160 more than halved the number of local school boards, so as to facilitate the consolidation of services, school closures and cuts in the number of school support staff. If, in the interests of avoiding an administrative nightmare, the Tories decreed that all existing teacher union-school board contracts will expire this

August 31, it was because they calculated that the union bureaucracy will ensnare teachers in a collective bargaining system designed to frustrate any struggle.

The lessons of last fall's strike

Last November, the Ontario teachers mounted a powerful two-week strike aimed at forcing the Tories to withdraw Bill 160. The Tories thought they would be able to witchhunt the teachers by claiming that they had taken two million school children 'hostage' and by denouncing the teachers for striking in violation of Ontario's restrictive labor laws. But the plan backfired. Teacher picket lines and demonstrations were swelled by parents and teachers outraged by the Tories gutting of public education. Moreover, the strike quickly came to be perceived as a vital test of strength between the Harris Tory government and all those who have opposed its agenda of stigmatizing and victimizing the poor, slashing social spending and attacking the trade unions.

Unquestionably, were teachers to return to the picket lines this fall, their action could again serve to galvanize working people in Ontario and across Canada. But it will do so, only if teachers and the entire working class draw the lessons of the betrayal of last fall's strike and strive to make the teachers' struggle the catalyst for the independent political mobilization of the working class--for an industrial and political struggle aimed at driving out the Tories and developing a movement for a workers' government.

A review of the conduct of the Ontario Teachers Federation and the Ontario Federation of Labour both during and since the strike provides irrefutable evidence that the union bureaucracy is opposed to and incapable of waging such a struggle.

Last fall's strike ended in defeat, not because the teachers were cowed by a powerful government, but because the teacher unions, the Ontario Federation of Labour, and the trade union-based New Democratic Party scuttled it. They feared that the teachers' strike was becoming the spearhead of a mass popular movement against the Tory government.

The leaders of the five teachers unions that comprise the OTF called the strike--which they termed a 'political protest'--fully expecting that the government would obtain a court injunction ruling it illegal. This would have then provided them with a pretext for terminating the strike and cutting a deal with the government. But the Tories' application for an injunction was rejected. The Ontario Court judge hearing the case concluded that popular

support for the strike was so great state intervention against it might dangerously erode support for the existing political order. In effect, the judge ordered the teachers' unions to assume responsibility for ending the strike.

The OTF and OFL leaders quickly complied. In the immediate aftermath of the rejection of the government's request for an injunction they offered the Tories sweeping concessions. When the government refused their offer, they declared nothing further could be done and ordered the teachers back to work.

Unions complicit in slashing teacher workforce

On terminating the strike, the leaders of the Ontario Teachers Federation vowed they would continue the struggle by joining with the OFL in its anti-Tory protest campaign, by mobilizing political opposition to the Tories, by mounting a court challenge to the constitutionality of Bill 160 and by fighting to uphold public education

What has been accomplished on these four fronts?

Within days of the end of the teachers' strike, the OFL elected as its president a United Steelworkers official who had been boycotting the OFL's Days of Action--one-day, anti-Tory regional demonstrations and walkouts--because he considered them too radical. Predictably, the OFL has now terminated its anti-Tory protest campaign altogether.

The teachers unions have allied ever more closely with the Tories' parliamentary opponents, the Liberals and the NDP. Yet these big business parties have been complicit in the assault on public education, health care and social programs. The federal Liberal government has cut \$6 billion per year from the transfers it makes to the provinces for welfare, post-secondary education and health care. It was the previous Ontario government, formed by the NDP, that launched the program of massive cuts to education and attacks on teachers' wages and working conditions. Neither the NDP nor the Liberals is proposing to restore the cuts made by the Tories. Former Premier Bob Rae, who according to press reports counsels his successor as NDP leader at least once a week, recently wrote that it would be folly for the NDP to commit itself to a program 'based on undoing many of the Harris changes.'

As for the unions' recourse to the courts, it has resulted in a court judgment that further undermines public education. Last month, an Ontario Court judge upheld all sections of Bill 160, except those that abolish the right of Separate--i.e. Roman Catholic--School Boards to levy taxes. This ruling bolsters the constitutional position of Ontario's Church-dominated parallel system of publicly-funded schools--a bastion of social conservatism--and is completely in line with Tory policy. The right has long-promoted the Separate Schools as a counterweight to the generally more liberal public system. An important result of the Tories' changes in education funding has been to reduce provincial grants to the public boards, while increasing them to the Separate Schools.

In any case, the system of education funding lauded by the unions--a combination of provincial grants and local property taxes--is no more progressive or equitable than that imposed by the government. Tying education funding to local property taxes means, as the Tories have been quick to point out, that wealthier

communities can spend more on education than poorer ones.

While denouncing the Tories for imperiling public education, the OTF has in fact has accommodated itself to the Tory agenda. When the government threatened to make unilateral changes to the teachers' pension fund, the OTF agreed to the fund being used to finance an early retirement scheme. This scheme has a double purpose: it enables the government to further reduce costs by cutting the number of high-seniority teachers and it, to a certain extent, insulates the Tories and the union leadership bureaucracy from rank-and-file discontent by enabling the government to slash the teacher work force through attrition, rather than through the layoff of younger teachers.

Last spring thousand of teachers across Ontario received layoff notices. Now few are expected to be without work, although many will be working under short-term contracts, and teaching subjects for which they have no training. School administrators admit that the quality of teaching will decline still further. Teachers, meanwhile, speak openly of chaos in the classroom.

That some 8,000 older teachers have taken chosen to retire early is a measure of both their disgust at the state of public education after more than a decade of budget cuts and their lack of confidence in the program of the union leadership.

At issue in the struggle to defend public education are two opposed social principles: should education spending and the curriculum be determined by human need or subordinated to the capitalist market and the profits requirements of big business. There is no question that the means exist to provide a quality education for all. But if society's resources are to be mobilized to end poverty and systematically raise the cultural and material level of the people, then economic life must be radically reorganized so as to bring the banks and corporate giants under the democratic control of the working class.

Such a transformation can be brought about only through a political struggle--the fight for a workers' government. Even were the unions not controlled by a privileged caste of bureaucrats, these organizations by virtue of their aims and composition are completely inadequate for leading such a struggle. What is required is the building of a new mass socialist party of the working class.

See Also:

Ontario unions bury protest campaign against Harris government
[31 July 1998]

The betrayal of the Ontario teachers' strike:

The lessons for all workers

[17 November 1997]



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