

Strikes in three Ontario school districts

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Two thousand five hundred Ontario high school teachers launched strike action this week to fight attempts by local school boards to force them to teach an extra period per school day and otherwise erode their working conditions

Under Bill 160--an omnibus law that has centralized control over education funding and policy in the hands of the province--the Tory provincial government has effectively halved high school teachers' paid classroom preparation time.

Technically, Bill 160 does not require school boards to force teachers to give classroom instruction in place of the time previously set aside for preparing their lessons. School boards could, instead, ask teachers to provide students with counseling or individual instruction. But as the government's new funding formula is predicated on eliminating thousands of jobs by imposing a larger workload on teachers, school boards have little choice but to make instructors teach seven rather than six periods per day, even while reducing their preparation time.

As a representative of high school teachers employed by the Simcoe District School Board noted, forcing a heavier workload on teachers in the name of improving the quality of education, as the Tories have done, 'is like saying the best way to improve health care is to make every doctor see more patients each day.'

The 1,000 high school teachers employed by the Simcoe board, which covers the Lake Simcoe area north of Toronto, and the 1,300 high school teachers at the Durham Board, which is comprised of Oshawa and Toronto's eastern outer suburbs, walked off the job August 20. Earlier in the week, 200 other members of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation went on strike against the Near North District School Board, which manages the schools in North Bay, home of Tory Premier Mike Harris.

The strikes could well be the beginning of a new

groundswell of opposition to the Tory's assault on public education. Last fall, 125,000 elementary and secondary school teachers, from both the public and the government-funded Roman Catholic school systems, mounted a two-week-long, province-wide strike to force the Tories to withdraw Bill 160. The strike won massive public support and forced the Tories onto the defensive. But the Ontario Teachers Federation, its five affiliated unions, and the Ontario Federation of Labour engineered an end to the strike when it became clear that to defeat Bill 160 would require the mobilization of the entire working class in industrial and political action to bring down the Harris government.

The Tories are banking that the unions will now constrain the teachers within the narrow and fragmented collective bargaining process, thus preventing the emergence of a province-wide struggle in defence of public education. Already several OSSTF locals have agreed to one-year letters of understanding with their respective boards. These agreements leave many of the most contentious issues to be resolved in future negotiations, but, if ratified, will serve to legally bar teachers from joining a province-wide strike movement.

The union bureaucracy's hostility to both militant strike action and the independent political mobilization of the working class was demonstrated by this past week's founding convention of the Elementary Teachers Federation. Claiming Bill 160 will be defeated at the ballot box, the federation's president Phyllis Benedict led delegates in giving Ontario Liberal Party leader Daulton McGuinty a standing ovation. After McGuinty promised to rescind Bill 160 and restore funds to kindergarten, junior kindergarten, and special education, Benedict said that the Liberals could expect her federation's support in the next provincial election.

McGuinty's promises are utterly hollow. The official

opposition in the Ontario legislature, the Liberals have supported the Tories' drive to balance the provincial budget through massive cuts in education, health care and social spending. Their main disagreement with the Tories over the past three years has been over Harris's plan to slash taxes even before the budget was balanced. In this, the Liberals have only echoed sections of the financial community. Meanwhile, at the federal level the Chretien Liberal government has slashed transfers to the provinces that help finance health care, welfare and post-secondary education by \$6 billion per year.

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