

Unions derail Ontario teachers' struggle

Lee Parsons

17 September 1998

Teachers across Ontario are currently involved in strike actions, lockouts and service withdrawals. While the teachers are negotiating with more than 70 different school boards, the disputes all revolve around the implementation and interpretation of Bill 160, the omnibus education 'reform' imposed by the Tory government late last year.

The provincial government's new funding formula--Bill 160 abolished school boards' limited financial autonomy--and other of Bill 160's provisions, like those relating to paid lesson preparation time, have meant huge cuts to education funding, layoffs and increased work loads for teachers.

Last fall, all of Ontario's 125,000 elementary and high school teachers mounted a militant two-week strike aimed at thwarting passage of Bill 160. Although the strike was ultimately betrayed by the leaders of the teachers unions and the Ontario Federation of Labour, it evoked widespread popular support for it went beyond the narrow framework of traditional collective bargaining. The teachers' linked the defence of their working conditions and terms of employment to the struggle against the Tories' assault on public education as a whole.

Today by contrast, there is little overt evidence of support for the teachers. This is not just because the unions have called few if any demonstrations. The unions have for all intents and purposes taken the struggle to defend public education off the agenda. Instead, they are negotiating within the framework established by Bill 160--i.e. how the Tories' cuts are to be implemented. Instead of urging working people to join the teachers in a campaign to defend public education, the unions have combed Bill 160 for loopholes and then sparred with the government over their interpretation. This has played into the Tories' attempts to twist reality on its head and portray themselves as champions of students' interests and brand the teachers as self-interested.

The government has cut hundreds of millions from public education, is sharply reducing high school teachers paid lesson preparation time, and is known to be plotting the privatization of much of the education system; yet Education Minister Dave Johnson was able to grandstand this week as a defender of public education when the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association asked him to temporarily set aside the government's new maximum class-size ratio, in return for a more lenient interpretation of what constitutes instruction time.

Under Bill 160, all contracts covering teachers at public schools and government-funded Roman Catholic schools terminated August 31, thus requiring negotiations between the five teachers unions and some 70 newly-created school boards on new two-year contracts. Agreements reached early on in this bargaining process,

which temporarily circumvented some of the stipulations of Bill 160, have been rejected by the government as pattern settlements for other boards.

At this point, two public school boards, Simcoe and Durham, are being struck. Elsewhere members of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation are participating in a campaign of rotating 24-hour strikes. The first of such strikes was held Monday at high schools in York Region, north of Toronto, and teachers at the Greater Essex School Board, which includes Windsor, walked off the job Wednesday. Strikes at two other public school boards have been settled.

Negotiations between the Catholic school boards, which are also government funded, and the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association have been off and on. Two school boards have been struck while the Toronto Roman Catholic Board locked teachers a week ago and two other boards have done the same this week. Over 7,000 Catholic schoolteachers are currently affected by either strikes or lockouts.

By accepting the negotiating framework established under Bill 160 last year, not only have the unions split teachers into a myriad of different bargaining units depending on type of board, (public, Roman Catholic, French), level of schooling and locality; they have rendered it impossible for the teachers to challenge the Tory government's underlying education policy and its gutting of education funding. The unions have agreed to negotiate with the school boards, although they know full well they have been stripped of all control over funding and virtually all control over education policy. Under conditions where, for the most part, their funding has been sharply reduced, the boards are being ordered under Bill 160 to reduce class sizes. This can only be achieved by greatly increasing the workload of individual teachers.

The Tories, meanwhile, have been allowed to adopt the posture of being aloof from the negotiations. Behind the scenes, however, they are pressing the boards to take a hard line and readying back-to-work legislation in case the strike movement widens despite the sabotage of the union leadership.

The attitude of Education Minister Dave Johnson has been, to say the least, duplicitous. Last Thursday, in a reportedly conciliatory move, Johnson indicated that he might be willing to accept, temporarily, a broader definition of classroom instruction time. He said, 'If it takes one more step to reach that objective, then we're going to have that flexibility because we want our kids back in class.' On Saturday he apparently reversed his position, saying, 'It's very simple. In three words: obey the law. Which one of the three words do they not understand?'

The actions of the union leadership have been consistently

motivated by fear that the teachers' struggle will become the spearhead of a working class offensive against the Harris Tory government. The teachers unions have sought to quell teacher unrest with promises to settle accounts with the Tories at the ballot box. Their calls for teachers to comply with Bill 160 while awaiting the next election only begs the question--who will replace them? While the unions in Canada have historically been tied to the New Democratic Party, it was the Rae NDP government that began massive cuts in education funding in Ontario and imposed a wage cut on teachers. With support for the NDP flagging, some teachers union leaders are leaning towards the provincial Liberals. This overlooks the fact that the Liberal government in Ottawa has acted in concert with the Harris government in Ontario, cutting \$6 billion per year from transfer payments to the provinces.

Many teachers recognize that neither the Liberals nor the NDP constitute a genuine alternative, but they are uncertain as to how best to proceed.

In speaking to Catholic schoolteachers in Toronto who have been locked out the WSWs encountered a great deal of frustration and confusion over the prospects for winning their fight. Frank, a teacher with over 25 years at the separate school board, recalled the strike action of a year ago: 'After two weeks on a political protest we were able to stand up to this government and to expose their lies. They are into destroying the public school system--the democratic right of every citizen in this country to a right to free education. And we understand what it means to privatize. It's going to create a more class society, more social divisions. And it will create a situation where there will be parents who will be desperate because they won't have the resources to send their kids to private schools. We feel, especially in Catholic education here, that we have to follow our faith and we have to make sure that we are not going to facilitate the wishes of this government.'

'I don't want to be too strong in terms of criticizing, but perhaps [the union leaders] have some other agenda.... And perhaps this worked also very much for the government. They wanted this kind of split, and they wanted very much these. I hope perhaps there will be enough time for the union still to have a united front against the government and perhaps to build up a political strategy to defeat the government. Unless they have their own agenda.'

Another teacher had this to say: 'As a group we have a fair amount of power. I think that the basic concern is the attack on the sick and the young, education and our hospitals.... And I think it's exactly what's happening in the States with downsizing and with the government joining arms and making deals with corporations.'

Trevor, a teacher for 11 years, told the WSWs, 'There's about a million dollars being saved a day by us being on strike. What the public doesn't understand, they think the teachers are fighting for more money. Since 'Bob Rae Days' I've lost \$40,000. Then I lost \$2,000 last year, so yeah, I'm fighting for \$500, if that. Right now what we're fighting for is more quality time with the kids. What we want is quality education because to get quality education down the road, it might be going private.'

'You know what's sad about the whole situation? It comes right down to dollars and cents. What the government promised when they got elected is that there'd be tax breaks and they'd cut the deficit. Well, how are they going to do that, where does the tax

payers' money go? It goes to health, it goes to politicians, it goes to teachers, it goes to transit workers. [The Harris government] is good for the rich because their tax saving thing helps the wealthy.'

'I think the kid who can barely afford shoes needs a place to go where he feels safe and where they know the teachers will be in the halls, not because they're forced to, but because they want to. You've never seen a teacher take his own private jet down south. You go look in a teachers parking lot and you won't see a Jag or a Porsche or a Mercedes, would you, so where is the money being spent?'

At Toronto's Labour Day parade a teacher told the WSWs: 'They're saying that each local should negotiate with their school boards and, as we all know, [the boards'] hands are tied because of the budget cuts by the Harris government. Education should be a basic human right, but under this system it's all about dollars and cents. According to the government, media, and some union leaders, the teachers should submit to the pressures. But the union suggests that instead of carrying on with the Days of Action we should defend the NDP and the Liberals. A lot of what the Harris government is doing now is just a continuation of what the NDP had started. But my feeling is who else would know more about education than teachers themselves. Since there is no political alternative, I think that teachers should offer themselves as independent candidates.'

The determination which existed last fall to fight this government is still widely felt by teachers, and it is clear that the experience of that defeat has not diminished their conviction to continue that fight. Many are wary of the role of the union bureaucracy, but see no vehicle outside the unions to carry forward their struggle.

The struggle to defend public education underscores the necessity of the working class building a new political party that will reject the subordination of social needs to the market.

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[10 September 1998]

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[15 August 1998]

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[17 November 1997]



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