

Ontario Tories to legislate end to teacher strikes

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The Ontario Tory government will introduce legislation Monday to force some 10,000 teachers in eight school districts to return to work.

Education Minister Dave Johnson feigned regret in announcing the Tories' intention to legislate against the teachers. But for months, the Tories been plotting to use back-to-work legislation to break teacher resistance to a frontal assault on their working conditions.

The government and media have mounted a concerted campaign to depict the teachers as indifferent to their students. Yet it is the Tories who, under Bill 160, have restructured the province's education system, centralizing control over school funding and curriculum in the hands of the Ministry of Education, so as to force through massive budget cuts, increase teachers' workload, and tailor the curriculum more closely to the demands of business.

Even at the most superficial level the government-media hue and cry against the teachers is twisted. A large percentage of the students currently off school are enrolled at four government-funded Catholic school systems that--with Johnson's express support--have locked out their secondary school teachers for the past three weeks.

The opposition parties in the legislature, the Liberals and the New Democratic Party, have indicated that they will not agree to the government's demand they waive normal parliamentary procedure so the back-to-work legislation can be adopted swiftly. They note that the Tories, unlike on previous occasions when Liberal and NDP governments in Ontario used legislation to break teacher strikes, have not waited for a ruling from the province's Education Relations Commission that the school year is 'in jeopardy' in the districts targeted by the legislation.

If the opposition maintains this position, the Tory

back-to-work bill will not become law for some two weeks. The teacher unions have indicated, however, they will comply with the legislation, which will provide for teacher-contracts in the eight districts concerned to be imposed by binding arbitration.

'I've got grave concerns,' said Marshall Jarvis President of the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association. 'However, I also recognize the fact that I'm getting absolutely nowhere and I've got 8,000 teachers and 130,000 students suffering because of it.'

The unions' bowing before the Tory back-to-work law is entirely in keeping with their compliance with Bill 160. The unions have accepted the collective bargaining framework established by Bill 160--no matter that this framework was designed to make it impossible for teachers to mount any effective struggle, by splitting them into a myriad of bargaining units and by forcing them to negotiate with school boards that have no fiscal independence and little control over education policy.

The Tories' back-to-work legislation will affect secondary school teachers who are either on strike or locked out at seven government-funded Roman Catholic school boards and one public school board, and elementary teachers at one Catholic board.

Although Bill 160 and the government's budget cuts impact on all teachers, it is high school teachers who, at least in the short-run, face the most drastic changes to their working conditions. The Tories have slashed high school teachers' paid classroom preparation time and, with the aim of reducing the provincial workforce by upwards of 5,000 teachers, are bent on forcing them to teach an additional school period day.

Last fall, Ontario's 125,000 elementary and high school teachers mounted a powerful two-week province-wide strike to press for the rescinding of Bill 160.

Precisely because the strike transgressed the limits of traditional collective bargaining and was conceived of by the teachers as a fight to defend public education, it evoked mass support. Until the teachers unions, working in conjunction with the Ontario Federation of Labour, ordered a unilateral surrender and called off the strike movement, the Tories were on the defensive.

Their attempts to witchhunt the teachers by claiming they had taken two million Ontario school children 'hostage' fell flat, and tens of thousands of parents and students joined teacher demonstrations.

By contrast, in recent weeks there have been no significant demonstrations in support of the teachers. Rather the press has been full of reports of irate parents demanding the government legislate against the teachers. The betrayal of last year's strike and the unions acceptance of Bill 160--they are now negotiating with the boards over how the budget cuts will be implemented--have gravely undermined the popular support for the teachers. The OFL, meanwhile, has contributed to the teachers' isolation by organizing no action in their support.

See Also:

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