

Tory drive to cut teacher jobs and school budgets

Strikes and lockouts in 7 Ontario school districts

Keith Jones
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About a tenth of all Ontario's publicly funded schools are currently closed by strikes or lockouts and more closures are imminent, as Ontario teachers face a wholesale assault on their working conditions.

To date, seven of Ontario's 72 school districts, including scores of schools in and around Toronto, have been shut by teacher walkouts or lockouts. The publicly funded Catholic board in Toronto locked out all its high school teachers Tuesday, the first day of the school year. Seven thousand high school teachers employed by the Toronto District School Board are threatening to stage rotating walkouts beginning next week.

Since the August 31 termination of all teacher collective agreements in Ontario, school boards in Canada's most populous province have moved unilaterally to alter teachers' terms of employment, imposing more classroom duties on a reduced work force.

In this, the school boards are acting as tools of the Conservative provincial government. Under legislation passed late last year, the Tories have concentrated control over education funding and policy in the hands of the Education Ministry, so as to ram through massive cuts in school funding and changes to the school curriculum. School boards have been stripped of their limited taxation powers, rendering them wholly dependent on the provincial treasury.

Among the most contentious of the provisions of the Tories' Bill 160 is a 25-minute daily reduction in high school teachers' lesson preparation time. By increasing high school teachers' workload, the government aims to slash upwards of 4,000 teacher jobs and reduce the Education Ministry's wage bill by tens of millions of

dollars per year.

'This is a fiscal exercise in order to reduce the number of teachers necessary to complete secondary programming,' explains Marshall Jarvis, president of the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association.

Citing the provisions of Bill 160, school boards have ordered high school teachers to teach seven of the eight periods in the school day, rather than old provincial standard of six. Some boards are refusing to guarantee that even the eighth period will be available to teachers for lesson preparation.

Last weekend, Education Minister Dave Johnson specifically instructed the boards to reject the teachers' unions claim that the 25 minutes cut from preparation time need not be added to the time teachers spend giving class lessons. 'Duties such as hallway or cafeteria supervision, home room, planning, programming and mentoring--though important--are not 'instruction,'" declared Johnson. The Education Minister promised that the Tories would introduce legislation later this fall to give its interpretation of Bill 160 legal force and close any loophole to sweeping job cuts.

On Tuesday, Johnson made a second declaration promising that the government will force an end to teacher strikes if the Education Relations Commission says that the school year is being placed in jeopardy. 'Very definitely, at that point I would be coming forward with legislation,' said Johnson. 'Back-to-school legislation.'

Johnson's statements underscore that the teachers are on a collision course with the Harris Tory government. The teachers unions, however, are determined to confine teachers within the collective bargaining

system established by Bill 160--a framework specifically designed to frustrate any struggle. Not only are teachers divided into numerous bargaining units, by type of board, locality, and level of schooling, but the provincial government isn't even party to the negotiations. Accepting the labor relations framework established under Bill 160, makes it impossible to challenge the Tories' assault on public education, its funding cuts and legislated changes to curriculum and teachers' working conditions.

The teachers unions and the Ontario Federation of Labour fear an all-out struggle by the teachers could become the spearhead of a mass upsurge against the Harris Tory government, which, since its election in 1995, has spearheaded Canadian big business's drive to destroy what remains of the welfare state.

Last week representatives of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation were telling Toronto-area teachers that the union is determined not to mount strikes against the Toronto and Ottawa-Carleton public school boards, the two largest in the province, because that was 'exactly what the government wants.'

The claim that there is no support for the teachers is belied by the events of last fall. A two-week province-wide strike against Bill 160 galvanized support from parents and students and was rightly perceived by much of the working class as a means of striking back at the hated Harris government. So isolated were the Tories that an Ontario Court judge rejected its application for a strikebreaking injunction for he feared such action might backfire and seriously undermine support for the established political order.

The unions' betrayal of last fall's strike--they responded to the judge's ruling by immediately offering the government sweeping concessions, then called off the strike--certainly caused dismay and demoralization in the working class. Just as importantly, the unions' reduction of the teachers' struggle to a narrow collective bargaining issue revolving around their workload, rather than a struggle to defend public education, has assisted the Tories in sowing confusion as to what is at stake in the current strike movement.

Last fall's strike won broad support precisely because it transcended the traditional limits of collective bargaining. The teachers clearly identified their struggle as one not just to defend their jobs and working conditions, but to defend public education--an

issue that goes to the heart of the democratic rights and social position of the working class.

Today, however, the unions have accepted Bill 160, and are disputing only how the budget cuts and other changes stipulated in Bill 160 are to be implemented. In effect teachers and those who defend quality public education are being given a choice of poisons.

It must be bluntly stated: Unless the teachers' struggle is placed on an entirely different axis--and becomes a conscious political struggle aimed at mobilizing the entire working class to drive out the Tories and at initiating a movement to build a new working class political party that rejects the subordination of education and all aspects of social life to the capitalist market--the Tories will prevail over the teachers and press ahead with the dismantling of public education.

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