

Ontario legislature orders teachers back to work

Our reporter
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Ten thousand Ontario schoolteachers returned to work Tuesday morning under the threat of \$2,000 per day individual fines. Only hours before, in a special late night sitting, the Ontario legislature had adopted legislation ordering an end to strikes and lockouts in 8 of Ontario's 72 school districts and empowering a government-appointed arbitrator to determine the teachers' terms of employment.

The Tory provincial government's back-to-work legislation was passed in a single day--the same day the legislature ended its summer recess--because the parliamentary opposition, the Liberals and the trade union-backed New Democratic Party, agreed to the waiving of normal parliamentary procedure.

Earlier, the opposition parties had vowed to block speedy passage of the legislation, arguing that the Tories had deliberately sought a confrontation with the teachers. But with the big business media pressing for swift action to end labor disruptions in Ontario's schools, the opposition quickly changed tack and negotiated a so-called compromise with the government.

The teacher unions, for their part, were prostrate before the government's latest legislative assault on teachers. 'In the face of the refusal of boards to negotiate, we recognize the inevitability of the government's actions,' declared Marshall Jarvis, president of the Ontario Catholic Teachers Association. Jarvis's remarks were made in the full knowledge that it is the Tory provincial government that controls the boards' purse strings and sets virtually all education policy.

Under the compromise that resulted in the speedy passage of the back-to-work legislation, the opposition waived normal parliamentary procedure in return for the Tories removing a section of the back-to-work law

that would have impacted on all Ontario teachers--not just those in the eight school districts that had been affected by strikes and lockouts since the new school year began in early September.

The next day, the Tories introduced a separate bill to achieve the same objective--to slash the province's teaching work force by upwards of 5,000 by increasing the number of classes high school teachers must teach.

Bill 160, last year's omnibus bill that centralized control of education in the hands of the provincial government, reduces high school teachers' paid class preparation time and increases their minimum weekly instruction time to 1,200 minutes. The teacher unions, having abandoned their opposition to Bill 160, have sought to prevent the Tories from realizing their job-cutting plans by arguing that classroom preparation time can be replaced by activities other than classroom teaching.

With the bill introduced Tuesday the Tories have moved to close this loophole, by stipulating, in law, that instruction time means only classroom teaching, and not library duties, guidance, monitoring, or mentoring (individual instruction).

The back-to-work bill does not outlaw job action by the rest of Ontario's 110,000 elementary and high school teachers, including the current campaign of one-day, rotating being mounted by the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation. But the union leaders will use it to further demoralize teachers and argue that all job action is futile. Jarvis has already said he will counsel his members to engage in no further strikes and that he believes the decision as to whether they boycott extracurricular activities should be an individual one.

Opposed to any struggle to mobilize teachers outside the reactionary collective bargaining framework established by Bill 160 and to mounting a challenge to

the Tory government and its entire financial and social policy agenda, the union leaders are seeking to channel teacher militancy behind the Liberals and NDP--no matter that these big business parties have themselves participated in wave after wave of cuts in social programs and government services.

The struggle Ontario teachers have mounted over the past year has shown that the defence of public education, including teachers' working conditions, requires a new political agenda--the rejection of the subordination of social need to the market, and a new political strategy--the mobilization of the working class as an independent political force through the building of a new mass socialist party.

See also:

Ontario Tories to legislate end to teacher strikes
[26 September 1998]

Unions derail Ontario teachers' struggle
[17 September 1998]

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