

Toronto school support staff workers strike

But unions oppose challenge to Bill 160

Keith Jones
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Fourteen thousand four hundred Toronto District School Board support staff workers are in their second week of strike action against management demands for sweeping job and pay cuts. Members of Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 4400, the strikers include caretakers, school board and school office workers, adult education teachers, lunchroom and hallway supervisors, and kindergarten and junior kindergarten education assistants.

The Toronto Board claims that changes in the formula the Ontario government uses to calculate the grants it makes to school boards mean the board's budget will be cut by \$300 million over four years. To make up the shortfall, the Board wants to eliminate more than 4,000 support staff jobs, contract out maintenance, janitorial and other services and impose pay and benefit cuts.

The strike is the latest in a series of contract struggles and political protests that have erupted in Ontario as teachers, school board support staff, students and parents seek to resist the provincial Tory government's assault on public education. Under legislation passed in late 1997 (Bill 160), the Tory government abolished school boards' taxation powers and centralized control over education policy and financing in the hands of the Education Ministry, so as to be better able to force through massive spending cuts, tailor the curriculum to the demands of big business, and promote private schooling.

The support staff strike is a direct challenge to the program of the Harris Tory government. Moreover it has the potential to become a rallying point for the mass popular opposition to the Harris Tory government. Even the press has had to concede that there is much sympathy for the support staff workers,

who are recognized to be poorly paid. (The strikers' average annual salary is \$26,000 and many earn less than \$20,000)

Most importantly, there is mass public support for a struggle to defend public education. When teachers mounted a province-wide strike against Bill 160 in the fall of 1997, it was the government that was pushed onto the defensive.

But the CUPE leadership is determined to keep the strike within the straitjacket of a collective bargaining system designed to split teachers and school support staff into a myriad of bargaining units and to make school board trustees and administrators the handmaidens of the government. Nothing has been done to link the Toronto workers' struggle with that of their counterparts across the province, although, as a result of the reorganization of school boards under Bill 160, all school support staff in Ontario are currently negotiating new contracts.

Like the leadership of the teachers' unions, CUPE has reconciled itself to Bill 160.

Forced to admit that the root cause of the current conflict is the Tory funding formula, the CUPE leaders do not demand the repeal of Bill 160 and oppose the subordination of education and public services as a whole to the profit imperative of big business. Rather they advance the bankrupt perspective of pressuring the school board into lobbying the Tories to modify their funding formula.

To win the board's favor, the union leadership is seeking to contain the strike's impact. CUPE is not asking teachers to respect its picket lines, although this week, in response to rank-and-file pressure it has organized mass picketing at about 20 of the board's almost 600 schools per day.

The teachers' unions for their part have been adamant

that teachers remain on the job. A teacher who tried to organize a walkout at Lawrence Park Collegiate was told by an Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation official that the union was contractually obliged to oppose such action. When asked why the union had been prepared to support a walkout in 1997, the official replied that the province's school boards had sanctioned the teachers' "political protest" against Bill 160.

It is true that the boards, which for their own reasons sought to have Bill 160 amended, opposed the Tories' request for a court injunction to break the 1997 strike.

But what really lies behind the union leadership's adamant opposition to any job action by teachers is their fear of unleashing a strike movement that escapes their control and becomes a working class political mobilization against the Tories.

The 1997 strike struck fear into the hearts of the trade union leadership, because it revealed both the potential and necessity of a working class political movement to drive out the Tories. Less than a month after, the teachers' unions torpedoed the strike, the Ontario Federation of Labour elected a new president known to have opposed even the OFL's anti-Tory protest campaign. For the 18 months, the union leaders' refrain has been that workers will be able to defeat the Tories at the ballot box. But both the Liberals and the social-democratic NDP have made clear that they support the key elements of the Tories "Common Sense Revolution," including "workfare," the gutting of public services and tax cuts that have served to transfer wealth from working people to the rich.

The militancy of the support staff workers notwithstanding, if their struggle remains under the organizational and political control of the union bureaucracy, it will go down to defeat.



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