

Toronto strikers speak out

"What's really at issue is the future of public education"

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The World Socialist Web Site interviewed two of the Toronto District School Board support staff workers currently on strike. Stan and Lisa both teach ESL (English as a second language) to adult immigrants.

What are the major issues in the strike?

Stan: In terms of what's on the bargaining table, the major issue is job security: if the school board and the Tory government get their way, over 4,000 jobs will be eliminated--that's nearly one out of every three members of the local. Wages are also a big issue: the average annual salary in the local is \$26,000 a year (which in a city like Toronto puts you just about the poverty line) and we haven't had a pay increase since 1993--in fact many of us took a 5 percent pay cut during the [New Democratic Party government's] Social Contract. The board is also looking to gut benefits and sick days--basically to strip us of every gain we've ever made.

But in a larger sense, what's really at issue here is the future of public education. Behind all the rhetoric, the real agenda is privatization, if not immediately, then certainly a year or two down the road. What they're heading to is contracting out the work of caretakers and secretaries, which means, quite simply, reducing them to minimum wage jobs. Privatization is also what's in store for adult education, in particular English as a second language, which is what I teach: basically, the government's message to the tens of thousands of immigrants who settle in this city every year is--we will no longer supply you with ESL classes; if you want to learn English, pay for it yourself. This is indicative of how the Harris government operates: it beats up on those it sees as weak and vulnerable--the poor on welfare, immigrants and now us, the bottom rung of the education system. If the government wins this battle and gets to impose privatization on us, it'll have opened up a breach in the whole system and the next step will be so-called charter schools and the whole right-wing agenda of dismantling public education.

To what extent has CUPE explicitly sought to tie the strike

to the struggle in defense of public education and against Bill 160? Is there any questioning among the strikers of CUPE's role in the 1997 teachers' strike, when it stood on the sidelines?

Stan: The issue of Bill 160 is front and center in this strike. It would have been impossible to avoid, even if the union leadership had wanted to. Any hope of saving the 4,000 threatened jobs depends entirely on revising the funding formula of the Toronto school board over the next three years and that formula is determined by the Tory policy of slashing \$1 billion from the education budget enshrined in Bill 160. So the question all along has been--how do you fight Bill 160? CUPE's answer is that you pressure the board to, in turn, pressure the Tories to change the formula. They point to the fact that last year, when 130 schools were going to be closed in Toronto, a public outcry forced the Tories to reduce the closures to 'only' 30. So the line of the local leadership and of CUPE Ontario head Sid Ryan is to get board chair Gail Nyberg 'on side'--meaning to get her to work with them to push for more money from the Tories. But Nyberg has made it perfectly clear which 'side' she's on--she's doing everything in her power to impose the Tory cuts. And even if she were to make some noises about the funding formula that wouldn't change a thing as far as the Tories are concerned. To put it charitably, the union's basic strategy is a pipe-dream.

Now, as for CUPE standing aside during the October '97 teachers' strike, it's important to distinguish between the union as an organization and the membership. You see, all of us now on strike did go out with the teachers, we did not cross their picket lines. And this was even true for many of us who don't work on school sites and who could have gone to work without crossing a line. Now, when the shoe is on the other foot, so to speak, we find the teachers crossing our lines--in fact, ordered to do so by their unions. It angers us and, as I know from talking to teachers directly, it frustrates and disgusts them as well: we don't want them to cross our lines and they don't want to do it either, most of them

understand that this is their fight as well as ours. Why then is this happening? It's clearly the responsibility of the union leaders--both the teachers' unions and CUPE. Actually, it's a kind of division of labor: CUPE doesn't officially call on the teachers' unions to honor our picket lines and the teachers' unions claim that their members have to go to work because they have a legal contract. Of course they also had a legal contract in 1997 and that didn't stop them from striking for two weeks. But that's a precedent they very much want to forget about. And so, if individual teachers, as has happened at several schools, refuse to go in to work, they can expect no protection from their union against reprisals from the board. To add insult to injury, the leaders of the OSSTF (high school teachers) and TTF (elementary school teachers) are loudly proclaiming their support for the strike: it seems that these days the way union leaders show 'solidarity' is by crossing picket lines!

What has been the attitude of teachers, parents and students to the strike?

Lisa: Well, there have been a variety of responses, and of course people's feelings are changing as the strike progresses. The fact that neither the elementary nor the secondary teachers' unions have called their members out, but continue to insist they report for work, has created a great deal of confusion for teachers, students and parents, as well as for the strikers. There's clearly support among teachers for the strike, but last week (the first week of the strike) that support was almost entirely confined to verbal assurances of solidarity and a continuous supply of coffee and donuts. There were a few exceptions: at one west end school, the parents organized a picket line on their own and wouldn't allow teachers in; at another school there was a group of 16 teachers who jointly refused to go in the morning but they were sent back to the classroom that afternoon by their union with the threat of reprisals. At several of the secondary schools, students have joined the picket lines.

At many of the schools, the situation in the first week was rather bizarre. The teachers were being told by *their* unions that they had to cross picket lines, while we were being told by *our* union that we couldn't stop students and teachers from entering, that we were not to "harass" people (i.e. inconvenience them!), that we were legally permitted to delay people for 15 minutes only, etc., etc. It was dispiriting and confusing for the strikers to have the teachers repeatedly express their support for the strike at the same time as they were crossing our picket lines. It was confusing for parents too: at my school we had a number of parents approach us to say they wished to support the strike but didn't know how they could best do that, by keeping their kids at home or by sending them to school to create a chaotic situation that

would make it clear the schools can't function without support workers. Many parents told us that what they really wanted was for the schools to be shut down, but so long as classes *were* continuing they were concerned about the kids missing classes and falling behind. As the week progressed, the CUPE workers, many of whom are experiencing their first strike, became increasingly frustrated, saying things like: "Well, is this a strike--or not?" and "What's the point of a picket line if it doesn't stop anybody from entering the schools?" This week, under growing pressure from the ranks, the union organized mass picketing at 20 secondary schools, so instead of 6 or 8 isolated picketers at every school, there've been pickets of several hundred, which is obviously a lot more effective.

How do workers view the four year-long struggle against the Harris government? What have been workers' reaction to the unions' decision to support the election of a Liberal government?

Stan: Everyone hates the Tories, everyone wants a change. There is no enthusiasm for the Liberals or, for that matter, for the NDP--and it's notable that nobody from these parties has made even a token gesture of showing up on our picket lines. The truth is that neither of these parties are a real alternative to the Tories--none of the basic policies of the so-called Common Sense revolution are going to be changed no matter who wins the next election; in fact, last week the NDP announced it wouldn't even restore the 21 percent cut in welfare, one of the most hateful of Harris's measures. The unions are justifying their support for the Liberals or NDP not on anything positive these parties are saying, but on an Anybody-but-the-Tories basis. Harris is referred to as "Mean Mike"--in other words, it's all just a matter of him being a bad guy, a heartless individual. But many workers know that there's more to it than that, that this is just simplistic, that you can't change things by voting for a 'nicer' guy. The teachers strike was the beginning of a real answer, a mass movement to resist the government's attack on public education. That strike was wound up just at the point when it had won enormous public support--just at the point when the future existence of the government was being called into question. But what's happening in our strike only confirms that public education will never be safe until that kind of mass movement is brought out on to the streets again.



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