

Tentative settlement in Toronto public school strike

Our reporter
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Negotiators for 14,400 striking support staff workers reached a tentative contract settlement with the Toronto District School Board March 12, then ordered those strikers who normally would be slated to work during this week's "March break" to do so.

Pending a ratification vote next weekend, Canadian Union of Public Employees officials are refusing to divulge the terms of the deal they have reached with Ontario's largest school board. But the proposed contract is believed to be for two years. This would mean its expiration will coincide with the phasing out of the "bridging funding" that Ontario's government is providing the province's school boards, during the initial stage of the Tories' "education reform." Under Bill 160, the Tories have centralized control over the province's education system by halving the number of school boards, and stripping them of their taxing powers and most of their say in education policy, so as to ram through massive budget cuts and revamp the curriculum to better reflect the demands of big business.

Strikers and defenders of public education are skeptical of the settlement and the secrecy that surrounds it. One striker told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "Whom are CUPE keeping the details of the tentative agreement secret from? Not the school board and not the Tories. They know what's in the agreement. We're the only ones left in the dark. And why? Clearly, they don't want to leave any room for the development of rank-and-file opposition."

Annie Kidder of People for Education, a group that has mobilized parents and others to oppose Bill 160 and the Tory cuts, said she fears the tentative settlement will not prevent the school board from cutting jobs. "My concern for the parents is that no matter how good the deal is--good for the board and the union--it will not

be good for kids, because it will inevitably mean fewer [support staff] people in the schools."

At a March 12 press conference, John Weatherup, president of the support staff workers local, CUPE 4400, claimed the settlement contains important improvements over an offer that the board had made earlier in the week. In that offer, the board refused to guarantee either job security or that it will not contract out work after August 2000. According to a union estimate, the jobs of 4,300 of the 14,400 support staff workers will be immediately threatened once the new Tory school funding formula takes full effect in September 2000. In its earlier offer, the board also refused to guarantee that some workers would not be subjected to wage cuts after August 1999, when the wages and benefits of the support staff workers, who previously were covered by some 30 collective agreements, will be harmonized.

Although endorsing the settlement, Weatherup admitted that it constituted "damage control." This suggests the union leadership has retreated on its demand for job security, in return for buyout packages. "We do not want anyone," said Weatherup, "to think that because a tentative settlement has been reached, that public education is not at risk. We have done important damage control, but the crisis in education cannot be resolved through collective bargaining alone.... We want to ring the alarm bells again. This government remains committed to vicious cuts which threaten to downgrade public education."

That "the crisis in education cannot be resolved through collective bargaining" is indeed true. But it begs the question: What has the CUPE leadership done to advance a working class political alternative to the big business agenda of slashing social and public services? In 1997, when more than 100,000 teachers

mounted a two-week strike to force the repeal of Bill 160, the CUPE leadership stood aside.

In the coming provincial election, CUPE, the teachers unions and the Ontario labour movement as a whole are preparing to stump for the Liberals and New Democrats--no matter that these parties have accepted the essential elements of the Tory "Common Sense Revolution": a balanced budget, "workfare" and tax cuts.

Last month Sid Ryan, the president of the Ontario Division of CUPE, announced his intention to stand for the NDP in the Toronto riding of Scarborough Center. Meanwhile, the teachers unions have announced plans to pour several million dollars into supporting the campaigns of the Tories' big business political opponents.

Upon being reelected head of the 50,000-member Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation at the union's annual meeting last weekend, Earl Manners told a press conference the union wants teachers to canvass for the local candidate, Liberal or NDP, who they believe has the best chance of defeating the Tory nominee. "We're asking [teachers] to get involved on a riding by riding basis with a candidate that they believe has the best chance of getting elected."

Manners justified his support for the Liberals and NDP by pointing to policy statements from both parties pledging them to repeal Bill 160, restore Junior Kindergarten and adult education programs and change the provincial funding formula so as to stop contracting out.

But Manners, unless he is willfully being credulous, knows full well these promises will never be implemented; and not just because the Liberals and New Democrats, like capitalist politicians everywhere, have repeatedly appealed to popular anger over mass unemployment, growing poverty and the dismantling of social programs, only to pursue the policies of their predecessors once elected to office. The Liberals' and NDP's promises on education would require restoring the more than \$1 billion per year that the Tories have cut from Ontario's education system. Both opposition parties, however, have been at pains to prove their "fiscal responsibility," i.e., their support for subordinating public services to the imperatives of the capitalist market and the demands of big business.



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