

Ontario Tories attack public education

Ian Bruce
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The Ontario Conservative government of Mike Harris has stepped up its attack on public education with a series of bills and amendments passed in the spring legislative session. Under the new legislation, Education Minister Janet Ecker assumes direct control over virtually every aspect of the provincial education system, with almost unlimited power to discipline, fire or harass anyone who stands in the way of the Tories' big business agenda for education.

The new legislation represents a continuation of the assault on public education launched by the Tories in 1997 with Bill 160, the Education Quality Improvement Act. Under Bill 160, the Tories have cut thousands of jobs, increased teacher workload, contracted out services, closed programs and schools, reduced the number of school boards and barred municipalities from raising additional taxes to support public education.

Nevertheless, the new legislation makes Bill 160 seem tame by comparison. Bill 74, the Education Accountability Act, regulates teacher employment and training, and allows the minister and school boards to throw out staffing provisions of existing collective agreements. Starting in September, high school teachers must teach seven courses, rather than six, in addition to assuming responsibility for other student counseling duties laid out in the legislation; this change will translate into a loss of an estimated five to eight thousand teaching positions across the province.

Under the new regulations, department heads, assistant heads and others in positions of added responsibility are also required to teach seven classes, meaning they have no administrative time. To prevent mass resignation from these positions, Bill 74 provides principals with a simple solution. Anyone who resigns a position of added responsibility can be ordered to continue fulfilling the duties of the position—without pay. Other members of staff can also be ordered to assume unpaid headship duties.

In the last round of contract negotiations, some school boards succeeded in using the funding cutbacks resulting from Bill 160 to impose a seven-period timetable on their teachers. Teachers employed by these boards have almost unanimously resigned their extra-curricular commitments. Although Bill 74 has become law, a clause pertaining to forced extra-curricular activities has not yet been proclaimed. Ecker has pledged to make it operational should teachers decide to hold children “hostage” during the coming contract negotiations. That provision would simply redefine extra-curricular duties as “co-curricular” and make activities which were previously done voluntarily, mandatory, without additional compensation. Principals would have the power to assign such duties as they saw fit, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and any teacher who refused to perform an assigned task would be

considered to be on illegal strike and subject to summary dismissal by the board or minister.

Many provisions of the current legislation are designed to convey an impression of rampant incompetence in the teaching profession, in order to erode confidence in public education and mask the difficult conditions teachers face. Bill 74 requires new teachers to write comprehensive exams, and forces all other teachers to take upgrading courses every five years, at their own expense and on their own time. (Bill 160 virtually eliminated professional development days from the school calendar.)

The bill also provides a mechanism through which members of the public are actively encouraged to file complaints against schools or individual teachers on matters ranging from curriculum to co-instructional activities. Such complaints will be reviewed by investigators appointed by the minister, with the cost of the investigation to be charged to the school board.

To browbeat publicly-elected school trustees, school board officials and teachers into implementing their plans, the Tories have given the Education Minister power to discipline boards and board employees, simply for questioning ministerial directives. The bill explicitly states that such ministry disciplinary actions are not subject to appeal, and are not reviewable by any court. Boards are prohibited from defending employees found to be in contravention of the bill, and boards themselves are subject to takeover at the whim of the minister. Individual school trustees can be fined up to \$5,000, dismissed and prohibited from running for office again.

To further deflect attention from the true causes of the mounting problems in Ontario schools, the Tories have mounted a hue and a cry about an alleged breakdown of discipline. Bill 81, the so-called Safe Schools Act, dictates a “zero tolerance” policy against violence, theft, drugs and weapons, and lays the groundwork for the establishment of “strict discipline and supervision” institutions for students expelled from mainstream schools. Teachers are empowered to issue single-day suspensions (a move vehemently opposed by all teacher unions), and principals can suspend students for a full year, up from the present limit of one week.

Daily singing of the national anthem is now mandatory in all classrooms. A number of Tory backbenchers have also demanded a daily reading of the Lord's Prayer. Following a storm of criticism, Ecker withdrew a clause requiring the recitation of a pledge of allegiance to Queen Elizabeth II, but gave school parent councils the authority to enforce the practice, and to institute school uniforms.

More significantly, the bill gives the minister immense power to witch-hunt anyone who dares question her authority. In the name

of safeguarding schools, the education minister is now authorized, not merely to order criminal background checks of all school personnel, but to compile exhaustive dossiers on teachers, board employees, potentially even students and parents.

If one is to believe the media, Harris's slash-and-burn education policies enjoy the support of broad layers of the population. The Tories know otherwise. Public input to Bill 74 was limited to two days of hearings in small cities far removed from the large metropolitan centres of Toronto and Ottawa. Over 500 individuals and groups were denied permission to address the hearings. Ecker has given short shrift to delegations of teachers, parents and trustees wishing to voice their concerns over the legislation, and has pointedly rebuffed the cap-in-hand requests of teachers unions to help implement the changes which the legislation demands.

In fact, the unions have essentially conceded defeat even before the legislation is implemented. Even the fiery, albeit largely hollow rhetoric of years past is gone. In asking teachers to authorize a strike when contracts expire this August, representatives of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation and the Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association have been careful to insist that such endorsement is essentially a public relations exercise to exert pressure on school boards to negotiate in good faith.

Our real revenge, teachers are told, will come in court challenges to the legislation, and especially at the ballot box in the next provincial election, not expected before 2003. Continuing with the same cynical strategy which helped the Tories win a second majority government in 1999, the union bureaucrats are promoting the Liberal and New Democratic parties. (Liberal leader Dalton McGuinty actually attacked Bill 74 from the right, complaining that Harris's plan to implement teacher testing over a five-year period was a retreat from an election promise to institute comprehensive testing by June 2000.) For their part, the Canadian Labour Congress and the Ontario Federation of Labour have issued only perfunctory statements opposing Bill 74 as a threat to collective bargaining.

Understanding the depth of the unions' betrayal requires some background. For more than a decade, the Ontario education system has been subjected to a continual series of cutbacks by successive Liberal, New Democratic and Tory regimes. The cuts instituted by the Liberal government of David Peterson were stepped up greatly under the 1990-95 New Democratic Party government of Bob Rae. The NDP launched a series of sweeping attacks on education under the same banners of "reform" and "increased accountability" that are the hallmark of the Tories. Many of the most regressive aspects of Harris's education policy were in fact NDP initiatives, and former NDP cabinet minister David Cooke now heads Harris's Education Reform Commission.

On taking office in 1995, the Tories made public education a primary target. When it became clear that the Tories had no interest in negotiating even relatively insignificant changes to Bill 160, the leaders of the teachers unions were forced to seek endorsement for a walkout in defiance of provincial prohibitions of the right to strike. The vote received almost 100 percent support, and a series of anti-160 rallies drew tens of thousands of teachers, parents and students. Still the Tories refused to budge, and in

October 1997 the largest education strike in North American history began when 126,000 teachers walked off the job.

From the outset, the strike received massive support from the general population, and support grew as the public came to see the teachers' struggle as a means of striking back against years of cuts to education, health care and other public social services. Although termed a "political protest" by the union leadership, the strike demonstrated the necessity and potential for a class mobilization aimed at bringing down the Tory government. Unable to keep the strike within the narrow limits of trade union negotiation, the union leaders moved quickly to sabotage it. At the height of its support and strength the strike was sold out in the most brazen fashion. (For details see "The betrayal of the Ontario teachers' strike" [17 November 1997] <http://www.wsws.org/workers/1997/nov1997/ont-n17.shtml>)

The years since the strike have seen a rapid deterioration in all aspects of the education system. In board after board, teachers have been railroaded into concessionary contracts. High school teachers in many boards, for example, have been locked into contracts whereby they are responsible for most of the duties previously the work of substitute teachers. Contrary to the claims of union leaders that this was only a temporary measure which would in the long run safeguard the teachers' interests, the boards have made clear that in upcoming negotiations they will demand that teachers continue to perform these duties, in addition to the extra class that Bill 74 will add to their timetables. Some boards are reportedly entering negotiations demanding that teacher preparation time be eliminated altogether.

Additionally, there is significant pressure from ruling circles to open the education system to profit interests, both within Canada and from the US. Recent proposals by the Ontario government will force public universities to compete for students and funding with measures that will allow the accreditation of private universities in the province by next year. Last spring the Tories took the lead in the drive to privatization by tying university funding to job placement records, an initiative that solidly ties education funding to the needs of the market.

There is no question that the attack on education will continue following the implementation of Bills 74 and 81. Ecker has already signaled her intention to introduce a system of merit pay for teachers, and a number of cabinet members openly support the establishment of charter schools. Big business is no longer content with the piecemeal corporatization of education. There can be little question that the Tories' long-term objective is wholesale privatization of the sort currently taking place in Britain.

Ian Bruce is a Toronto high school teacher.



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