

33,000 public sector workers strike in Ontario

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More than 30,000 Ontario provincial workers walked off the job March 12 in one of the largest strikes of its kind in Canadian history. Although the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) has over 45, 000 members, a large portion of its workers, including ambulance dispatchers, lab technicians and water treatment workers, are prohibited from striking because they are deemed to be in essential services.

On the key issue of wages, the union last week lowered its demand from 6 percent to 5 percent in each of the next two years. The government has offered yearly increases of only 1.95 percent in a three-year contract. For 1,700 nurses and skilled workers it has offered one-time raises of 10 percent and 8 percent respectively. Other major issues in the dispute include job security and pension provisions.

The OPSEU leadership, headed by Leah Casselman, has portrayed the strike as a defense of public services. The union says staff shortages caused by years of job cuts have endangered public safety in areas such as water and soil testing. This is substantiated in a recent report from the government-commissioned Walkerton Inquiry in which the actions of the Ontario Tories were cited as contributing to the deaths of seven people from e-coli contamination last year. The Tories continue to claim that no such dangers exist but have nevertheless demanded that testing and other essential services continue during the strike.

The union is also objecting to the awarding of a \$194 million overhaul of the provincial welfare system to Andersen Consulting, the accounting firm at the center of the ongoing Enron scandal in the US. By all indications this could be a protracted strike and the union is resting on a strike fund of \$27 million, which it has amassed since the last province-wide strike by 55,000 OPSEU workers in 1996. That action, which lasted five weeks, was hailed as a victory by the same union leadership despite the acceptance of massive job

cuts by over one quarter of its members. Coming on the heels of the election of the new Tory government, the defeat set the stage for an all-out assault on workers in the province. Throughout six years of job cuts, privatization and downsizing outlined in the Tory “common sense revolution,” the trade union movement has been virtually paralyzed in the face of a legislative onslaught which has gutted workers’ rights and working conditions.

After filing six applications, the government won rulings from the Ontario Labour Relations Board (OLRB) last Wednesday preventing strikers from delaying traffic across picket lines for more than 10 minutes. The court rulings also compel workers to abide by essential service provisions. There have been reports that essential service workers such as ambulance dispatchers and lab technicians have withdrawn services in some centers. Union President Leah Casselman has denied there have been any violations and said her members will comply with the orders.

Contract talks broke down last Tuesday, prompting the union to call a strike beginning at midnight. No new talks have been scheduled. The strike comes in the middle of a Tory leadership race to replace outgoing Premier Mike Harris who, after the last year of political debacles, will resign from office when a new leader is chosen March 23. Harris is currently away on vacation. Labour Minister Chris Stockwell, who is also a leadership candidate, has said that if he becomes premier he will not change the employer’s offer.

The government will not return to session until next month and there have been no indications that there will be any legislated end to the strike in the near future.



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