

Ontario Tories impose massive cuts on urban schools

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Ontario's Tory government has seized control of public school boards in the province's three largest urban centers in order to ram through massive spending cuts.

Last month the elected public school trustees in Toronto, Ottawa and Hamilton rebelled against a Tory diktat that they table a balanced budget for the 2002-03 school year based on the province's funding allocation. The Tories responded by appointing supervisors to impose budgets on the recalcitrant public boards—budgets that meet the government's demand for \$130 million in further cuts.

Premier Ernie Eves and Education Minister Elizabeth Witmer have claimed that the cuts will come from non-classroom expenditure. But this has already been belied by the Ottawa supervisor's order eliminating 50 special education and 8 teaching assistant positions.

Since coming to power in 1995, the Tories have made public education a principal focus of their free-market "Common Sense Revolution." They have mounted a frontal assault on teachers' rights and working conditions and stripped school boards of their taxation powers and autonomy, so as to slash education spending and enact changes to the curriculum in conformity with the demands of big business. In real terms, public spending on elementary and secondary education has been slashed by \$2 billion or almost 15 percent since 1994.

Moreover, the Tories have promoted Ontario's state-funded, parallel Catholic school system and private schooling, as an alternative to the public education. Starting this year, parents who send their children to private schools will receive a 10 percent tax rebate on tuition fees and in 2003 this rebate will rise to 20 percent on a maximum of \$7,000 in fees.

The Tory assault on public education has provoked widespread public opposition. For two weeks in late 1997, 125,000 elementary and secondary school teachers defied Ontario's restrictive labor laws to mount a strike against an omnibus Tory education bill, warning that it would result in increased class sizes, reduced teacher-preparation time, and massive cuts to education spending. The strike galvanized opposition to the government and had the potential to become the spearhead of a working-class political offensive aimed at driving the Tories from power. But when the courts refused to grant the government an injunction ordering an end to the

strike, the Ontario Federation of Labour and the teacher unions scuttled it and soon after abandoned their "Days of Action" campaign of anti-Tory demonstrations and one-day walkouts.

In the ensuing five years, public education has been ravaged. So marked has been the deterioration that it has sparked concern in ruling class circles that corporate competitiveness could be undermined. Last February, the administrators of all 72 of the province's public school boards signed a letter warning that under-funding had reached crisis proportions.

Eves, in his campaign to win the Tory leadership and succeed Mike Harris as Ontario Premier, tried to distance himself from the Tory record on education—no matter that he had been deputy premier and finance minister for the five first years of Tory rule—saying he wanted to work with teachers, teacher unions and others in fixing the public education system. With much fanfare, the Eves government announced a \$400 million increase in education funding in last June's budget, but three-quarters of that simply offsets inflation and rising enrolment.

The confrontation with the school boards has further exposed the lack of substance to Eves' claims of a more compassionate conservatism. In resisting calls for his government to make-up the shortfall in the budgets of the three largest urban boards, Eves is seeking to mollify sections of big business who fear any let-up in the offensive against the working class could fan popular opposition.

Eves, Witmer and other Tory spokesmen have presented the takeover of the three urban school boards as a necessary response to trustees who were spending precious education dollars on frills and "non-classroom" items. This is in keeping with the narrow three "R's" approach to education that the Tories have promoted.

For instance, the government questions the need for schools to provide food programs—classifying these programs as "non-classroom" expenditures. As if children did not need to be properly fed in order to learn. The truth is schools, especially in the large urban centers, have been increasingly forced to address a myriad of social problems—everything from the lack of daycare, to hunger and bullying—that have resulted from the dismantling of public and social services, the corporate drive to maximize profits, and the increasing and interrelated increase in family stress and social anxiety.

With 300,000 students, the Toronto District School Board, is the largest in the country, and has to address particular problems relating to high poverty—at 32 percent, Toronto’s poverty rate is almost double the provincial average of 17.5 percent—and the integration of large numbers of immigrant youth, many of who are non-native English speakers. (Just last year, Toronto received 108,000 new immigrants. At any one time the Toronto School Board has about 1,000 students who are of “indeterminate immigration status,” i.e., persons who are seeking Canadian government recognition as refugees.)

Yet the Tories insist that the Toronto board must make do, under its funding formula, with the same per capita student grant as boards in smaller localities and dismiss programs that address the needs of impoverished students or non-Canadian and non-English speakers as non-essential.

As would be expected, the Tories have named as supervisors persons committed to their right-wing agenda. The Toronto supervisor, Paul Christie, was the manager of Environment Minister Chris Stockwell’s campaign to win the Ontario Tory leadership.

To date, only the Ottawa-Carleton Board supervisor, Merv Beckstead, has actually announced any cuts and the cuts he has made account for only \$4.7 million of a \$23 million shortfall. But a Tory-appointed auditor, Al Rosen, has recommended a wide range of cuts to the services provided by the Toronto District School Board—cuts totalling the full \$93.5 million of the board’s deficit.

Rosen’s recommendations include:

- * cutting \$20 million from building maintenance, \$6 million from pools, and \$11 million from classroom computers;

- * elimination of some principal jobs and 63 full-time vice principals (\$5.6 million)

- * cutting 62 special-education positions created in June (\$4 million)

- * closing 10 elementary schools and 2 secondary schools (nearly \$8 million)

- * that user fees cover the costs of two week-long outdoor education programs normally provided free to 20,000 grade 6 and grade 7 students.

- * cutting youth councillors and parenting centres.

The school trustees refusal to adhere to the Tories’ budget demands is a gesture of opposition aimed at pressing the government to make a modest increase in education spending. The nature of their opposition is exemplified by the composition of the Toronto District School Board’s “No-Cuts Caucus.” The No-Cuts trustees include four social democrats aligned with New Democratic Party (NDP), several Liberals, including two who have already secured Liberal nominations for the next provincial election, and two members of the Communist Party of Canada. It has been suggested in the press that the main spokesperson and de facto leader of the caucus, Kathleen Wynne, could be named Education Minister should the Liberals win the next provincial election.

In hopes of parlaying popular discontent over the dismantling of public education and health care into office, the Ontario Liberals routinely denounce the Tories for chronically underfunding public services. Yet they have embraced virtually the entire Tory tax-cutting program and have repeatedly pledged that they would not allow the province to incur a deficit.

The NDP has in recent months sought to reposition itself to better appeal to mounting anti big business sentiment. But it was the social democrats who paved the way for the Tories to come to power, by ditching their modest reform program and initiating massive cuts to social and public services, workfare, and many of the changes the Tories have made to the education curriculum and teacher working conditions.

If the trustees opposition is a protest gesture, it nonetheless underscores the absence of any action by the trade unions. In a major address to 250 local union leaders, Earl Manners, president of the 50,000-member Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation and one of the principal architects of the betrayal of the 1997 strike, declared, “Patience is a virtue and we are virtually out of patience with this government. If the funding formula is not fixed by the beginning of second semester at the end of January 2003, then this government will see an abrupt end to our patience.”

The union bureaucracy has eagerly clutched at Eves’ offer of increased consultation and is today more than ever opposed to any independent political mobilization of the working class. OFL President Wayne Samuelson boasted in a recent interview with the *Toronto Star*: “They [the Tories] have told me that they won’t do anything that impacts on us without first talking to me. So far, they have lived up to that.”



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