

Union orchestrates end to Ontario college teachers' strike

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27 March 2006

A three-week strike by over 9,100 instructors, librarians and counselors at Ontario's 24 community and technical colleges has been brought to an end after their union and the colleges agreed to have their contract written by an arbitrator.

Members of the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU), the instructors walked off the job March 7 to demand increased job security and a reduction in workload and class sizes.

There was mounting pressure from the provincial Liberal government and the media for an end to the strike, with warnings that if it continued the school year could be lost. The OPSEU leadership, for its part, made clear that it was eager to find a means of ending the strike. On Wednesday it urged the provincial government to end the strike by supporting binding arbitration. But it denounced college negotiators for calling for "final offer selection," a form of arbitration under which the arbitrator chooses all the contract proposals of one or the other side in a labor dispute.

Chris Bentley, minister of training, colleges and universities, took OPSEU's call as a signal to intensify pressure to end the strike, saying both sides were agreed that some form of arbitration should be used. In response to a renewed plea from OPSEU President Leah Casselman for "urgent action to end the current dispute," Premier Dalton McGuinty joined the chorus pushing for a speedy end to the strike, declaring on Friday, "This Monday morning, there is no reason whatsoever our young people should not be in school attending classes." By Saturday morning the two sides had formally agreed to take down picket lines and resume classes today.

The strike was marred by violence, with John Stammers, a 62-year-old accounting instructor, dying three days after being struck by a car while picketing.

Police have said that there is no evidence that the driver, a parent who was collecting a child from a daycare center housed in one of the colleges, struck Stammers deliberately and have announced that no charges will be laid.

From the outset, the OPSEU leadership made clear that the strike was in no way a challenge to the current Liberal government, which has failed to make good on promises to massively reinvest in education, after years of budget-cutting under the Tory regime of Mike Harris.

The union has stressed that the main issue in the dispute is not wages—college negotiators have offered 12.6 percent over four years—but rather working conditions and the quality of education. The union has demanded improvements to the workload formula so as to allow for smaller classes and more time for students and, most importantly, more full-time instructors. According to the union, classes can have as many as 90 students and up to half of the courses at some colleges are taught by part-time teachers. Part-time instructors receive few or no benefits and have no job security.

Both the New Democratic Party and the opposition Tories criticized the Liberals for not intervening sooner to bring an end to the strike.

The strike by OPSEU was called shortly after the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) called off plans for an Ontario-wide strike of municipal and school board employees to protest changes to the management of their pension plans. At that time, McGuinty took a very aggressive stance, accusing CUPE of preparing to mount an illegal strike and vowing that his government wouldn't be blackmailed.

The Liberals were elected in October 2003 with the tacit support of the union bureaucracy, which claimed that they would be more friendly to working people and

amenable to pressure than the Conservatives. But the Liberals have left the key tenets of the so-called Common Sense Revolution—massive tax cuts for business and the well-to-do, workfare and radically reduced welfare benefits, and antiunion laws—in place.



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