# Ontario's Liberal government to slash teachers' wages

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**23 August 2012**

Ontario Liberal Premier Dalton McGuinty filed notice Monday that he will recall the provincial legislature from its summer recess next week to pass legislation imposing sweeping concessions on the province's elementary and secondary school teachers.

The concessions include a two-year wage freeze, a huge cut in bankable sick time, three additional unpaid days off (the equivalent of a 1.5 percent pay cut), and the reduction of seniority-grid pay increases.

The government is also giving itself the power to ban teachers' strikes.

The contract terms to be imposed by the legislation will mirror the takeaway agreements three smaller teachers' unions struck with the government earlier this summer.

Over the past month, McGuinty has been pressuring local school boards and the various teachers' unions to conclude contracts that would mesh with the government's austerity drive to slash $15 billion in public spending over the next three years. The two largest unions comprising 93,000 members—the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario (ETFO) and the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF)—have so far withheld their full acceptance of the government's concessions demands.

The government's austerity budget, passed with the support of the Ontario New Democratic Party (ONDP) last spring, starves the public health care system of funds, means tests senior citizens for pharmaceutical prescription coverage, closes schools, and slashes hundreds of millions from social welfare programs. But the centerpiece of the budget's proposed savings hangs on the imposition of a two-year wage freeze on 1.2 million provincial public sector workers, including civil servants, teachers, nurses, hospital workers and municipal employees.

McGuinty, whose Liberal minority government depends upon the parliamentary support of either the social democratic ONDP or the ultra-right Conservative Party, has attempted to whip up a crisis atmosphere in the province this summer conjuring up scenarios of strikes and all-out labour chaos in the schools should the teachers unions not "come to their senses". He hopes that this strategy will bode well for his party in two September 6 by-elections that would see his government gain majority status in the legislature should the Liberals win both contests. But hedging his bets, the premier was quick to point out that any vote by the recalled legislature on the government-dictated teacher contracts will not be considered a matter of confidence, meaning that were the government to be defeated it would not fall.

McGuinty's plan to impose concession contracts on teachers and the threat that similar legislation will soon target hundreds of thousands of other Ontario public sector workers takes the attack on workers' rights in Canada to a new level. Whereas over the past 14-months the Conservative federal government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper has issued back-to-work orders against tens of thousands of workers at Canada Post, Air Canada and Canadian Pacific Rail, the Ontario Liberals are preparing legislation to ban strikes and impose give-backs whilst negotiations are continuing and before the teacher unions have taken any steps to mobilize their members for strike action.

Indeed, the leaderships of both the OSSTF and the ETFO have been enthusiastic supporters of the big business Ontario Liberal Party for many years. Ken Coran, president of OSSTF, has already signalled that his union is on-board with the wage freeze and simply wishes to negotiate the cuts to seniority grid increases. ETFO leader Sam Hammond has characterized McGuinty's threats as "the most concentrated attack on collective agreements and public sector workers" in his members' lifetimes. Despite this, Hammond has not ruled out continuing to support the Liberals.

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The Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) has not even issued a press release to oppose the Liberals' impending wage-cutting legislation. Last April it mounted a demonstration against the Liberals' budget cuts, then immediately supported the ONDP's facilitating the passage of the government's austerity budget—a budget that is predicated on the imposition of a wage freeze on tens of thousands of OFL members and more than a million Ontario workers.

Reprising its role of last Spring, the ONDP has refused to even nominally oppose the Liberals' demand that workers' sacrifice their wages to balance the budget or their claim that services must be slashed. ONDP leader Andrea Horwath has repeatedly said that her principal concern with the Liberals' teacher legislation is that it could be struck down by the courts.

"We're concerned about the extent to which this could lead to a Supreme Court challenge and thereby cost this province a heck of a lot of money," she declared last week.

Horwath has reason to tread lightly in attacking McGuinty, since his policies recall her own party's imposition of a wage freeze combined with unpaid leave for government workers when the NDP formed Ontario's government under Bob Rae in the early 1990s. The Rae NDP's "social contract" cut over $2 billion from the government's wage bill.

In the current situation, Horwath would prefer that McGuinty arrange for the virulently anti-union Conservative Party to provide his minority government with the votes it needs to impose concessionary contracts on the teachers.

There is a certain division of labour in the minority parliament orchestrated by all three big business parties. Whilst the ONDP allied with the Liberals to ensure passage of the spring budget, there was a tacit agreement that subsequent bills on labour issues stemming from that budget would best be carried by a Liberal-Conservative legislative alliance. This would allow the NDP to pose as a "friend of labour," the better to work with the OFL to divert worker opposition to the government's austerity program into impotent protests.

But the Conservatives have yet to commit to supporting the government. They are pressing the Liberals to immediately legislate a wage freeze for all public sector workers, as part of their push for a massive assault on workers' rights.

Hence, Horwath's refusal to say whether her party will vote for or against the Liberals' anti-teacher law.

Utterly opposed to any struggle against the Liberals austerity program, the teachers' unions are making a to-do about their plans to oppose McGuinty's pay freeze through the courts. Citing a 2007 Supreme Court ruling that overturned the British Columbia Liberal government's attempt to void an existing collective agreement and impose a new austerity contract on health workers, the unions have postulated that the Liberal's wage freeze scheme will be struck down by the courts as a violation of workers' constitutional right of free association in collective bargaining.

In reality, the courts have played a major role in the assault on the working class, upholding one anti-worker law after another. Only last year, Canada's highest court ruled that the workers' "right to freedom of association" does not necessarily imply any collective bargaining rights; it merely entails that workers have the "right" to have an organization that from time to time brings their grievances to the attention of their employers.

In the 2007 case, the court reprimanded the government for needless bypassing the union apparatus, for imposing concessions by government fiat without first entering into negotiations with the union to see if its cost-cutting objectives could be achieved voluntarily. In other words, it was cautioning governments not to needlessly undercut the legitimacy of the trade unions, which have played and continue to play a fundamental role in maintaining the existing oppressive social order.

At the same time, in its 2007 judgment the Supreme Court reaffirmed the prerogative of federal and provincial governments to engage in "hard-bargaining," impose collective agreements through legislation in "exceptional circumstances" and strip workers of the right to strike.

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