

Ontario teachers' unions seek concessions deal

Carl Bronski
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The Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF) has postponed until next Monday limited job action on the part of high school teachers in Toronto and six other school board districts in protest of provincial Liberal government legislation that cuts real wages and imposes other concessions on public school teachers.

Adopted in September, the misnamed *Putting Students First Act* (Bill 115) is part of Premier Dalton McGuinty's draconian austerity plan to cut \$15 billion from the Ontario budget over the next four years by freezing the wages of public sector workers and slashing funding for social services. Twenty-four additional school boards, with members also organized by the OSSTF, will be in a strike-lockout position by the end of this month.

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 bulk of the budget's proposed savings hang 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.

Officials in the giant, provincial civil servants union (OPSEU) have already said they would accept at least a one year wage freeze, whilst Sid Ryan, president of the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) recently hailed the concessionary contracts signed in September by the Canadian Auto Workers union at Ford, General Motors and Chrysler as an example of what could be achieved by negotiation.

In the case of the teachers, Bill 115 requires that their unions negotiate concession contracts by December 31 with the province's 31 provincial school boards based on a government-dictated template that includes a two year wage freeze, the delay of experience-based pay increases for new teachers, a 50 percent cut in sick days, abolition of sick day banking rights, the addition of three unpaid professional

development days and the illegalization of strike activity. The bargaining template is based on deals already signed this past summer by two smaller teachers' unions representing Francophone and Catholic Elementary school boards.

Although the teachers entered a legal strike position on Wednesday, future, potential "job action" will be limited by union president Ken Coran to an "administrative strike." OSSTF will advise teachers to stop attending staff meetings, answering e-mails outside of school hours and supervising students outside the classroom. To date, the central union body has stopped short of instructing teachers to stop coaching school teams and advising school clubs, let alone withdrawing teaching services.

Asked if a full-blown strike was a possibility, Coran replied that "it would not be in anyone's best interests." Coran's eleventh hour cancellation of the mild "job actions" planned to begin Wednesday was meant to prepare the ground for further discussions on concessions with the government this week. Coran's not unexpected climb-down was welcomed by the Minister of Education, Laurel Broten. For its part, the Elementary Teacher's Federation of Ontario (ETFO) has advised its 76,000 strong membership to ramp up "pressure" on the government by writing only the bare minimum on student report cards.

Both the OSSTF and the ETFO have been enthusiastic supporters of the big business Ontario Liberal Party for many years. The union officialdom have stumped for McGuinty in three elections and hailed him as "the education premier." Coran has already signaled that his union is on-board with the wage freeze and simply wishes to negotiate over the freeze on 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.

The Liberals' attack on public sector workers has thrown the government into deep crisis. As a minority government,

the Liberals depend on the support of either the Conservatives or the Ontario New Democrats (ONDP) to stay in power. Whilst garnering the votes of the ONDP to pass their austerity budget last spring, the Liberals now hope to gain the support of right-wing Conservative leader Tim Hudak to ram through legislation, patterned after Bill 115, freezing the wages of almost a half-million other public sector workers. Hudak, however, has demanded even deeper concessions from the unions.

There is a certain division of labour in the minority parliament involving all three big business parties. Whilst the New Democrats allied with the Liberals to ensure passage of the spring budget, there was a tacit agreement that subsequent bills on anti-worker measures stemming from that budget would best be carried by a Liberal-Conservative legislative alliance. This would allow the Hudak Conservatives to drive government proposals further to the right whilst giving room for the ONDP to pose as a “friend of working people”—the better to work with the Ontario Federation of Labour to divert worker opposition to the government’s austerity program into impotent protests such as those currently announced by the teachers’ unions.

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. Provincial New Democrat leader Andrea Horwath has repeatedly said that her principal concern with the Liberals imposing a wage freeze through government fiat is that it could be struck down by the courts and thereby end up costing the government large sums of money.

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 ONDP formed Ontario’s government under Bob Rae in the early 1990s. Rae’s “social contract” cut over \$2 billion from the government’s wage bill and generated deep resentment in the working class.

In the current situation, Horwath much prefers 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 public sector workers.

Late last month McGuinty announced that he would stand down as premier. Then, with only brief and perfunctory opposition from the New Democrats and Conservatives, he immediately proceeded to prorogue (shutdown) the provincial legislature to give his government time to work out a deal with Hudak and/or the various union bureaucracies.

The union officialdom, who claimed to be outraged when

federal Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper twice prorogued parliament in Ottawa, happily welcomed the sudden McGuinty “time-out.” With nary a word of criticism about the anti-democratic nature of McGuinty’s maneuver, Ken Lewenza, president of the Canadian Auto Workers union, which represents 15,000 Ontario public sector workers, stated, “I think we have got to take advantage of it. We have to find a way to get a bargained agreement rather than a legislative one.”

The OSSTF quickly issued a statement effusively thanking McGuinty “for his years of public service in Ontario.” The statement went on to congratulate his government for initiating “many progressive changes over the past nine years. Together, the Premier and education partners have accomplished a great deal in Ontario’s public education system.”

This past weekend, OSSTF leader Coran stated that the impasse with the Liberal’s could be overcome “within an hour” if the government would allow his union to take over the running of the teachers’ benefit plan and all the financial liabilities in the plan that the government currently shoulders. Coran claimed the move would save the government \$419 million, thereby allowing school boards additional room to negotiate salaries. The proposal has been hailed by the *Globe and Mail*, the traditional mouthpiece of the Bay Street financiers.

The full implications of what the OSSTF is proposing are not yet clear. When the United Auto Workers took control of the benefit plans at the Detroit Three car companies in the United States several years ago, the fees paid by workers increased whilst coverage was diluted. What is clear is that the secondary teachers’ union has surrendered to the government’s concession demands and is trumpeting the proposed off-loading of the benefit plan as a means to solidify the Liberal’s austerity drive while providing union functionaries with new possibilities to enrich themselves as the overseers of benefit funds.



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