

Ontario Liberals impose sweeping concessions on teachers

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Invoking the provisions of its anti-worker Bill 115, Ontario's Liberal government imposed concession contracts Thursday on 100,000 elementary and secondary school teachers.

The concessions include a two-year wage freeze, the halving of sick-leave days, the abolition of the right to bank sick-days and receive a payout upon retirement, and a delay in the application of seniority-grid pay increases for recently-hired teachers.

Teachers with more than ten years of service will be able to cash out a portion of their banked sick-days; those with less seniority will be paid just ten cents on the dollar for any sick-days they have accrued.

The terms of the government-imposed contracts mirror in virtually all respects the takeaway agreements that unions representing teachers at the province's publicly-funded English Catholic and Francophone school boards struck with the Ontario government last summer. Those deals were made under the shadow of a looming threat by the provincial government of Premier Dalton McGuinty to unilaterally impose concessions through legislated contracts.

In announcing the imposition of concession contracts, Education Minister Laurel Broten warned that a ban on job action, including strikes, during the life of the two-year contracts will be strictly enforced.

In December, elementary school teachers staged token, localized one-day strikes to protest the government's concession demands and its attacks on their collective bargaining rights. High school teachers have not taken strike action, but have instituted a boycott of extra-curricular activities.

In an entirely transparent "olive branch" to the unions, Broten promised that the Liberals will ensure that Bill 115 is ultimately repealed by the legislature—but only after the full scope of its provisions

have been implemented!

Adopted in September, the misnamed *Putting Students First Act* (Bill 115) is a key element in the government's plan to cut \$14.4 billion from the Ontario budget over the next four years by slashing funding for public and social services and cutting public sector workers' real wages.

Passed with the support of the Ontario New Democratic Party (ONDP) last spring, the Liberals' 2012 austerity budget 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.

In the case of the teachers, Bill 115 empowered the government to impose concession contracts if, by the beginning of the 2013, the unions had not "voluntarily" reached agreements based on a government-dictated template. This template was based on the concession deals accepted by the Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association and the *Association des enseignantes et des enseignants franco-ontariens* (AEFO-Ontario Association of Francophone Teachers).

Bill 115 also targets tens of thousands of school support staff, including custodians, administrative staff, cafeteria workers, and teacher assistants. Broten extended the December 31st deadline for signed agreements to January 14th for support workers represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). CUPE leaders have ratified a tentative concessions deal at the provincial level, but this will not be put before local union committees and a

full membership vote until next week.

The Ontario Federation of Labour and the Ontario teachers' unions have at the most mounted only pro forma opposition to the Liberals' wage freeze. So as to demobilize workers and convince them that they are isolated, each union has pursued separate negotiations with the government and no effort has been made to tie the defence of workers' collective bargaining rights to opposition to the ruling elite's assault on public and social services.

Meanwhile, the union-supported New Democratic Party has focused its criticisms on the efficacy of the Liberals' Bill 115, which it claims will likely be deemed unconstitutional by the courts and thereby end up costing the government large sums of money. The NDP shares the Liberal and Conservative objective of balancing the budget by 2017 and agrees with them that the deficit must be eliminated on the backs of working people through social spending cuts, wage "austerity," and new tax and other charges.

The Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF) and the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario (ETFO) have for many years been enthusiastic supporters of the big business Ontario Liberal government, hailing McGuinty as "the education premier" and stumping for the Liberals in the past four elections.

Ken Coran, leader of the OSSTF, signaled that his union was on-board with the wage freeze and simply wished to negotiate over the freeze on seniority grid increases. In late November, OSSTF negotiators reached contracts with several local school boards that were subsequently approved by Education Minister Broen as conforming to the government's austerity template. However, when put to a vote, rank-and-file teachers in the York Region and Niagara, two of the province's largest school districts, rejected the proposed contracts.

ETFO leader Sam Hammond has characterized Bill 115 as "the most concentrated attack on collective agreements and public sector workers" in his members' lifetimes. Despite this, he has not ruled out continuing to support the Liberals.

Coran and Hammons responded to Broten's announcement that the government is imposing sweeping concession contracts with brief statements of mock outrage before the television cameras. They

urged teachers to place their confidence in the courts to strike down Bill 115—although Canada's Supreme Court has repeatedly approved wage-cutting and anti-strike laws—and hedged on whether they will follow through on earlier threats to organize a one-day walkout in the event the government imposed concessionary contracts.

Should they organize a "day of protest," it will be with a view to siphoning off teachers' anger and diverting them behind the pro-austerity NDP.



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