

# Ontario teachers' union funded Liberal leadership candidates

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The *Toronto Star* reported this week that the largest secondary school teachers' union local in Ontario donated at least \$30,000 to candidates running to succeed Dalton McGuinty as head of a provincial Liberal government that is implementing a brutal austerity program and running roughshod over worker rights.

The donations were given in the run-up to the January 26th Liberal leadership convention that chose Kathleen Wynne to head the Ontario Liberals and take over as premier of Canada's most populous province. The financial support from Toronto's District 12 of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF) was provided even as both high school and elementary school teachers were embroiled in a bitter six-month dispute with the Liberal government over its imposition by legislative fiat of a concessions-laden contract that includes a two-year wage freeze and the halving of sick-day benefits.

The union donated \$10,000 each to Wynne and Eric Hoskins, who as members of McGuinty's cabinet approved and voted for Bill 115, the draconian legislation under which the government imposed the concession contracts and suspended teachers' right to strike. During the leadership campaign, both vowed they would not reopen the government-imposed concessionary contracts. In pre-convention debates, Wynne repeated the tired line of big business politicians everywhere that "there is no more money" for workers' wages—this despite serving in a government that slashed the corporate tax rate by 25 percent since 2009.

Two other candidates, Glen Murray and Gerard Kennedy, received \$5,000 donations from District 12. Murray, who eventually withdrew from the leadership contest to support Wynne, was also a member of the cabinet that drafted Bill 115. Kennedy, an also-ran candidate without a seat in the legislature, claimed that if he were chosen leaders he would try to restart contract negotiations with the teachers, but defended both the wage freeze and the Liberals' austerity program.

In an interview with the *Star*, OSSTF District 12 president

Doug Jolliffe said that the donations had been made in recognition of the candidates' "progressive politics".

"Progressive politics"? One is almost at a loss for words.

First elected in 2003, the McGuinty Liberals maintained the key policy changes of their Conservative predecessors' "Common Sense Revolution." These included a more than 20 percent cut in welfare benefits and massive tax cuts that were designed to swell the real income of the most privileged sections of society and cripple the state's capacity to fund public and social services. In 2009, the Liberals joined with the federal Conservatives to "bail out" the auto industry—that is to make it once again a lucrative source of profits for investors—insisting that any aid for the automakers be conditional on GM and Chrysler workers accepting wage and benefit cuts of more than \$20 per hour.

Last spring, these same "progressive" politicians adopted an austerity budget that starves the public health care system of funds, means tests senior citizens for pharmaceutical prescription coverage, closes schools, slashes hundreds of millions from social welfare programs and calls for a two-year wage freeze on 1.2 million provincial public sector workers, including civil servants, teachers, nurses, hospital workers and municipal employees.

It is no secret that the OSSTF and the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (EFTO) have been full-throated backers of the big business Liberals for well-over a decade. Along with the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) and United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), the OSSTF and EFTO have stumped for the Liberals in successive elections through their Ontario Working Families Coalition.

As underscored by District 12's showering of funds on Liberal leadership candidates, the unions' opposition to the Liberals' attack on teachers' wages and rights was nominal. As early as last summer, the OSSTF and EFTO leaderships signaled that they were ready to bow before the government's demands for a wage freeze and other concessions, but they urged the government to "respect" their role as interlocutors between their memberships and the school boards. The unions, they insisted, play a useful role in

containing workers' discontent; to by-pass this key instrument for managing class relations would be unwise.

To contain the genuine anger of rank-and-file teachers, the OSSTF and EFTO initiated mild (and sometimes voluntary) work-to-rule campaigns last fall. Then in late November they sent three contracts accepting Liberal concession demands to local memberships—two of which were soundly rejected. Localized and token one-day strikes by elementary school teachers just prior to the Christmas break were not extended as union leaders quickly bowed to a January labour board ruling declaring that any further job action was illegal.

With Wynne's imminent ascension to the post of premier, the EFTO and the OSSTF are preparing to return to "business as usual." Last week, OSSTF President Ken Coran and EFTO head Sam Hammond had an 80-minute meeting with the incoming premier in which she insisted that the government-imposed contracts will not be rescinded. Nevertheless at the end of the meeting, both Coran and Hammond declared themselves satisfied. "It was the first meeting I've had with government representatives in over a year that were positive," said the EFTO president. "It was a pleasant change."

If the *Toronto Star*, a paper that has long supported the Liberals, chose to divulge District 12's financial backing for key architects of Bill 115, it is because it wants to hurry this "normalization" process along. Specifically it wants to prod the unions into officially declaring their surrender to the wage freeze, by withdrawing their sanction of a teacher boycott of certain administrative tasks and all extra-curricular activities.

Like the teachers' unions, the Ontario Federation of Labour and the OFL-supported NDP are using McGuinty's exit to provide a cover for their abject surrender to the government's wage freeze and for a further deal to prop up the minority Liberal government as it oppresses forward with the implementation of its austerity agenda.

As in the run-up to last spring's budget, whose passage was secured thanks only to NDP support, the NDP has entered into negotiations with the Wynne-led Liberals. While these negotiations are taking place behind the scenes, Ontario NDP leader Andrea Horwath has publicly urged the Liberals to adopt a handful of new policy initiatives, even while insisting that none of them constitutes a "line in the sand." The policy changes include an "Obama-style" subsidy for employers who hire young people and implementation of a report on welfare whose recommendations are so rightwing they have been endorsed by Tim Hudak, the leader of the Conservative Official Opposition who only last month boasted that he would slash benefits for long-term welfare recipients.

These developments provide striking confirmation of the

warnings the *World Socialist Web Site* and Socialist Equality Party (Canada) made in a statement issued to participants in the Jan.26 rally the OFL mounted outside the Liberal leadership convention. It read in part:

"Thousands of workers and young people will march today on the Ontario Liberal leadership convention to voice their opposition to the brutal austerity measures and attacks on democratic rights being implemented by the provincial Liberal government. Their anger is entirely justified. But they will be little more than props in a political charade, if they do not recognize that the trade unions and their allies in the New Democratic Party are complicit in the Liberals' assault on public services and worker rights.

"The social-democratic NDP has propped up the minority Liberal government at Queen's Park, including making a deal last spring to ensure adoption of the Liberal budget—the centerpiece of its austerity agenda. The unions have contained and suppressed working class opposition to the Liberals' social spending cuts, public sector wage freeze, and anti-worker Bill 115.

"Only through a political and organizational break with these pro-capitalist organizations will the working class be able to mount a counteroffensive against big business' drive to make working people pay for the greatest crisis of world capitalism since the Great Depression."

The full statement can be read here:

*OFL and NDP complicit in Liberal attacks:* Workers need a new perspective and new organizations to mount class political struggle



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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