Ten thousand education workers strike at two Toronto universities

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Teaching assistants and contract professors at York University in north Toronto began a strike Monday night after voting down a contract offer that failed to address concerns over job security for the non-tenured teaching staff and tuition costs for international graduate students.

The job action effecting 3,700 workers comes a day after picket lines went up at the University of Toronto (U of T), where over 6,000 teaching assistants are on strike against the administration's inadequate funding package that has not increased since 2008. Strikers at both universities are members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE).

Over 100,000 students are affected by the strikes. At York, the university has cancelled all classes. At U of T, the administration has announced that classes will not be affected, although student tutorials and labs have been cancelled and grading discontinued. Despite the university's assurances, some classes have already been postponed.

CUPE members at York voted by 71 percent against a contract offer after the local union bargaining team recommended that the administration's proposals be rejected. At U of T, over 1,000 teaching assistants who attended a meeting to decide whether to send a proposed contract to a membership-wide ballot as part of the final ratification process, ignored the unanimous recommendation of their local union executive endorsing the tentative deal and voted overwhelmingly in a show of hands to reject the agreement. Observers said the rejection was by 90 percent or more.

Even before picket lines went up, the U of T's chief spokesperson in the dispute, Provost Cheryl Regehr, made an unsuccessful attempt to interfere with the democratic vote, suggesting to the press that the decision of the mass membership meeting be unconstitutionally over-ridden in favour of a second "full" vote to be organized by the union.

The last strike by teaching assistants at U of T occurred in 2000. That dispute lasted three-and-a-half weeks. The strike at York follows a three-month job action six years ago that saw the Liberal provincial government use back-to-work legislation against the strikers.

During that dispute, local officials of CUPE threatened to challenge the legality of the back-to-work legislation and continue the strike. But it subsequently backed down after pressure from the national union. The CUPE leadership has reportedly long considered the York membership "too radical." Angered by what they considered the CUPE leadership's sellout of a bitter strike in 2000, the local six years ago sought to exclude the national from directly participating in the negotiations.

The strike at U of T arose over the school administration's current system of poverty-level compensation. Although teaching assistants would be paid $43.97 per hour in the first year of the contract that was just rejected (a slight increase over the past contract), the staff are only entitled to earn a maximum of $15,000 per year–a stipend well below the Ontario poverty line. Furthermore, the limited amount of hours teaching assistants are allowed to work negatively impacts on students needing their assistance, especially under conditions where class and tutorial sizes continue to increase.

At York University, a major area of dispute is over the university's practice of renewing teacher contracts at the very last minute (or not renewing them at all) and, if renewed, extending the offer for only one term or even one semester. The membership is demanding that non-tenured teaching staff be assigned to courses

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for up to three years.

Both disputes, however, highlight much broader issues in post-secondary education. Tuition costs have increased steadily over the past decade even as the quality of a university education continues to be diluted as schools embrace a business model philosophy geared towards the specific research demands of their corporate donors. In addition, the road for post-graduate students to a tenured professorship has become ever more difficult, with universities using contract employees to teach ever increasing numbers of classes. At York, 64 percent of undergraduate classes are now taught by contract faculty.

These trends are a North America-wide phenomenon. Last week, contract or "adjunct" professors and teaching assistants in college campuses across the United States staged protests and walkouts to highlight the plight of the super-exploited part-time instructors that now comprise the majority of faculty on campuses. In the United States, adjunct faculty, who perform the same tasks as full-time, tenured faculty now comprise 75 percent of the 1.8 million instructors at colleges and universities. Many work without any benefits and are essentially temp employees working from semester to semester without a contract and subject to termination at management's whim. Nationally, the median salary per three-credit course is $2,700.

Spokespeople for the administrations at both U of T and York have cited the provincial Liberal government's austerity strictures on net financial increases on newly-bargained contracts to justify their refusal to meet their employees' demands. The executive officers of both universities, nonetheless, are happy to accept annual salaries ranging from $250,000 to $775,000.

The Liberal government of Premier Kathleen Wynne has insisted that the already cash-starved universities and colleges cut $40 million in spending from their budgets in 2014, and an additional $80 million this year.

The austerity budget the Ontario Liberal government tabled in May and which was hailed by the unions as the most "progressive" budget in decades stipulates that for three years beginning in 2015 there will be no increase whatsoever in government program spending. Due to inflation and population growth, this nominal spending freeze will translate into real, across-the-board, spending cuts of well over three percent per year or more than 10 percent by 2018. Moreover, this comes after years of Liberal austerity measures.

Declaring the recession over, the Liberals in 2010 announced a multi-year program of tax cuts for big business, while initiating, in the name of deficit reduction, an austerity drive. For much of this period, the government was propped up by the provincial New Democratic Party (NDP) of Andrea Horwath with the unions' whole-hearted support.

Students at both York and U of T have voiced strong support for the striking workers. They too continue to suffer under the policies of the government. Already, the average Ontario undergraduate student pays $7,100 in annual tuition fees, graduating with an average debt of $27,000. Graduate students pay on average $8,000 in tuition per year. These figures do not take into account additional compulsory fees, which run into the hundreds of dollars per year. Under the government's new tuition-fee framework, annual tuition in 2016 will cost $8,000 and $9,000 for undergraduate and graduate programs, respectively.

In their drive to channel ever-greater amounts of society's wealth into their personal bank accounts, the ruling elite is determined to systematically reduce the living standards of education workers whilst returning to the days when only the sons and daughters of the wealthy had access to quality education. That is why the fight to defend the rights of education workers and students alike is, above all, a struggle for social equality and a vast redistribution of wealth to meet the needs of society as a whole.

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