

Toronto university strikes: OFL head conceals unions' support for Liberals

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Sid Ryan, president of the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) and the former president of the Ontario division of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), spoke last week at rallies of strikers at both the University of Toronto and York University. In his addresses Ryan cynically masqueraded as an opponent of the big business Liberal government of Premier Kathleen Wynne, concealing the support he and the unions have provided for the Liberals and their austerity agenda.

Ten thousand education workers at Toronto's two principal universities are entering their second week of job action against administration attacks on their living standards and the lack of job security.

Teaching assistants and contract instructors at York University began a strike last week after voting down a contract offer that failed to address concerns over job security for the non-tenured teaching staff and tuition costs for graduate students. Early Saturday morning it was announced that a revised tentative agreement will be placed before the York strikers, members of CUPE Local 3903, Monday evening. Strikers knowledgeable about the contents of the revised offer have denounced it in an avalanche of emails to the Local 3903 membership.

The job action affecting 3,700 York education workers began a day after CUPE picket lines went up at the University of Toronto (U of T), where over 6,000 teaching assistants and non-tenured faculty are on strike against the administration's grossly inadequate funding package that caps TAs annual salaries at \$15,000 per year—well below the provincial poverty line. Workers there had voted overwhelmingly to turn down a tentative contract endorsed by the union local executive.

Over 100,000 students are affected by the two strikes.

At the two rallies, featured speaker Sid Ryan offered his trademark bombast, excoriating an Ontario Liberal government that has steadily reduced funding for higher education for years as part of its ongoing austerity

policies.

Listeners, however, might be forgiven for giving their earmuffs a smack in the sub-zero Toronto cold. Indeed, as one striker at the U of T rally cried out in exasperation during Ryan's oration, "Then why did you support the Liberal budget"?

Good question.

Prior to the June 2014 provincial election call, most of Ontario's union officialdom, including the OFL and CUPE Ontario, had been pressuring the NDP to continue propping up the minority Liberal government, as they had done since 2011. Both OFL President Sid Ryan and Jerry Dias, the head of Unifor, Canada's largest industrial union, lauded the 2014-15 budget the Liberals tabled in the legislature and urged the NDP to ensure its passage. Ryan glowingly described the budget as an "NDP budget," while Dias claimed that under the "leadership of Kathleen Wynne and NDP leader Andrea Horwath, Ontario has the opportunity to rebuild and ensure all Ontarians can prosper."

This was no aberration. The first of the Liberal austerity budgets—passed with the acquiescence of the social democrats of the NDP in 2012—made \$14 billion in cuts to provincial expenditures over the ensuing three years, including for Colleges and Universities.

It has been estimated that 105,000 jobs have been lost as a result of the Liberals' austerity measures. Health care has been starved of funds and 8,000 more hospital beds cut, escalating the pace of the disintegration of quality public health care. Seniors are now means-tested for pharmaceutical prescription charges. Public schools have closed and other services, including child welfare, early learning, and mental health programs, slashed. Poorly paid part-time and contract work have continued to increase on university campuses as class sizes grow larger and fewer tenured professors are hired.

The centerpiece of the April 2012 budget was 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. That stricture led directly to the Liberals illegalizing teacher job action after elementary and high school teachers resisted the government wage freeze and other concession demands. Even after this, the NDP, at the urging of Ryan, the OFL and the rest of the union bureaucracy, continued to prop up the Liberals. Indeed, the NDP's Horwath briefly flirted with the idea of joining Wynne in a formal coalition.

Under Ryan's leadership, the OFL campaigned enthusiastically for the return of the Liberal government in the June 12, 2014 Ontario election. His "strategic" or "smart" vote campaign—which is to be the model for the Canadian Labour Congress in this year's federal election—calls for the unions to throw their support and financial and organizational muscle behind Liberal candidates whilst backing a smaller number of sitting NDP legislators.

Ryan was joined at the U of T rally by NDP provincial legislator Peter Tabuns. Like Ryan, he denounced the Liberal government whilst neglecting to mention that his party campaigned on an austerity platform last June and had propped up the big business Liberal government for the three years prior to that.

Ryan's and Tabuns' bluster notwithstanding, the NDP and the unions have responded to the deepest crisis of world capitalism since the Great Depression of the 1930s by shifting ever further to the right. The party system at Queen's Park—and in Canadian national politics generally—are mechanisms through which the ruling class regulates class tensions so as to divert and diffuse social discontent and politically suppress the working class.

At the rally at York University, Ryan's lying oratory was once again put on full display. There, Ryan claimed that the three month long strike by education workers at York in 2008-2009—when Ryan was president of CUPE Ontario—was a "victory". Trade union leaders have a long history of portraying abject defeats as brightly coloured feathers in their caps. In fact, the York strikers were legislated back to work by the Ontario Liberal government with none of their demands met. When strikers in the local threatened to seek a court order against the legislation, the central union apparatus pressured them to stand down.

In a 2013 interview in the *Guardian*, Tyler Shipley, a York striker in 2008 and CUPE Local 3903's chief spokesperson at the time, stated unambiguously that the

strike had been lost. Shipley went on to condemn the chicanery emanating from CUPE headquarters. The union bureaucracy interfered with the bargaining process, censored communications from the striking local, and withheld strike pay over the Christmas holiday, despite having promised it.

Some strikers interviewed by the WSWS at the U of T rally were initially buoyed by Ryan's oration. Upon further discussion about the union's support for the Liberals, many paused to take a closer look at a WSWS article being distributed on the strikes. Others gave a more broad response.

Jim, a U of T graduate student in the sciences, said: "You have to look at beyond what is happening here. It's not simply the immediate contract issues, as important as they are. You have to look at the years of budget cuts by the government. You have to look at the ever-rising tuition fees. Heck, even if we win this strike and get a few extra dollars, tuition hikes, transit costs and just trying to live in Toronto is going to eat that up. So, really, we still lose. I don't see anyone in the unions truly fighting against that."

At York, a striker called for a broader mobilization of the working class, "The universities are all fighting about the same issues—not enough funding, tuition is too high, precarious work. And there may be more strikes. These patterns are common across all the provinces in Canada and are the same even in the United States." He continued, "We are leading the way in a sinking ship in terms of our action, so we need to build more provincial and national and truly international organizations that can take on the political fight."



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