

Toronto: University strikers denounce union officials

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At a boisterous, seven-hour long contract ratification meeting attended by some 1,300 York University education workers Monday evening, scores of rank-and-file members bitterly denounced the tentative agreements placed before them by the bargaining team of Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 3903.

Union officials had come to the meeting recommending the membership ratify contracts for all three striking bargaining units, declaring the deals contained near “historic” gains for the 3,700 teaching assistants, contract instructors, and graduate assistants.

But when the votes were counted, Unit 1 Teaching Assistants and Unit 3 Graduate Assistants roundly rejected the union’s recommendation. Unit 2, comprised of 1,000 contract instructors, voted to accept their deal after the bargaining team split the membership by agreeing to reduced wage increases in exchange for the university modestly raising the number of full-time positions it will give to contract instructors over the life of the three-year contract.

Strikers who attended Monday’s meeting told WSWs reporters of a veritable rebellion against the union leadership, as speaker after speaker took the floor to lambaste union officials for recommending the sell-out agreements. The official on the podium representing CUPE National headquarters came in for particular opprobrium, with members demanding that the bureaucrat rein in a “condescending and arrogant tone.” The union’s lawyer also came under fire after her pro-administration interpretation of crucial contract language met with derision from the assembly.

The oppositional sentiment displayed at the union meeting is echoed daily on the York picket lines. “Our bargaining team is just trying to get jobs with the NDP (New Democratic Party) or the union after graduation,” said one Teaching Assistant.

“They’re trying to fool us by giving with one hand and taking more away with the other,” said a striking Graduate Assistant. “There’s a huge gap between what the union is

trying to do and what the membership wants,” said a third striker to nods of agreement from his colleagues. Other strikers, disgusted with the antics of their own union officials, have raised the demand for “open negotiations” whereby union members can attend the bargaining sessions.

Central to the dispute are proposals surrounding the indexation of tuition fee-rebates. York University graduate students pay some of the lowest tuition fees in the province as a result of rebate provisions in previous Teaching and Research Assistant agreements. But in 2013, the university administration exploited a “loop-hole” in contract language to raise tuition fees for international graduate students by a whopping \$7,000 per year. The union grieved this move and the issue still sits before an arbitrator.

In the just-rejected contracts, the union and the university agreed to a three-year tuition freeze for current members. Strikers were adamant that the freeze is a major concession and for multiple reasons. The international students would continue to pay the dramatically increased fees.

Furthermore, the proposed agreement created room for the university to attack the entire tuition rebate language in the contract to be negotiated three years hence and thereby do to domestic graduate students what it has already done to international graduates. Finally, the union-recommended deal would have created a two-tier system of employment, as incoming graduate students would lack the previous protections. With the prospect of huge rises in future tuition fees, this matter is crucial to any new contract.

In response to the contract rejections, the York University administration announced that most courses in the Schools of Engineering, Business, Nursing, Administrative Studies and Human Resources Management would resume as of yesterday. The university has said it is making plans to restart most other courses by this coming Monday.

The York University Faculty Association, the Canadian Association of University Teachers affiliate that represents tenured and tenure-track York professors, plans to take no meaningful action to oppose the university’s plans to resume classes. It issued a statement Wednesday saying that

although it “cannot legally advise members to cease carrying out their professional responsibilities,” it will defend professors who in their professional judgment decide that a class cannot go forward.

The faculty association’s own contract with York expires at the end of April and there is every prospect of a major conflict as the university—in line with a provincial government drive to eliminate “duplication” at universities—is drafting plans to downsize and even eliminate whole departments.

For its part, the CUPE leadership has refused to give any instruction to the thousand Unit 2 contract teaching staff, for whom there is now a ratified deal, to respect the picket lines of their fellow Local 3903 members. The union, abandoning all principles of solidarity, has simply stated that crossing picket lines is an “individual decision.”

From the beginning, CUPE has been determined to keep the dispute with the University within the narrowest confines of trade union collective bargaining. Yet the conditions of low wages, precarious employment, and rising education costs faced by the York education workers arise directly from the cuts to post-secondary education carried out by Ontario and federal governments.

There has been no attempt to rally the 100,000 students who attend York and the University of Toronto (where a similar strike amongst CUPE graduate student employees and contract-instructors is underway) in support of the strike and in defence of public education, and to fight for the development of an working-class counter-offensive against the austerity program of the Ontario Liberal and federal Conservative governments.

These matters are of crucial importance if the strikes are to be won. At York, there has been increasing tension on the picket lines as police increase their mobilization against the strikers. In recent days police have threatened picketers with arrest in forcing their lines to move away from thoroughfares. Police now stand alongside picketers in some locations.

“The police are now picketing the picketers,” observed one York University professor. Their presence, however, is not directed at defending the right of strikers to peacefully picket. On Monday, an irate motorist rammed the picket line at the Shoreham campus entrance, injuring two strikers, including carrying one on the hood of his speeding vehicle for almost a kilometer.

At the University of Toronto (U of T), where a strike by CUPE education workers is also in its second week, the University has actively intervened to smooth the administrative process for strikebreakers to teach tutorials and labs. In addition, a private security firm has been engaged to monitor strike activity.

Over the past ten days, strikers at both York and the University of Toronto have received crucial lessons in the perfidy of the pro-capitalist trade unions. At U of T, a tentative agreement recommended by the union was rejected last week by over 90 percent of the voting membership.

This is an experience common to any group of workers in Canada and internationally who seek to mount a struggle. The unions today act as proponents of the employer and big business governments within the ranks of the membership they ostensibly “represent,” containing and suppressing job action and imposing wage and other concessions.

CUPE officials – alongside the Ontario Federation of Labour—have provided political support to the Ontario Liberal government and its austerity budgets and encouraged the New Democratic Party to prop up the Liberals in the provincial legislature during the nearly three years of minority government (October 2011-May 2014).

Based on the “success” of the campaign for “strategic voting” in the last Ontario election—which helped secure Wynne and her Liberals a majority—the unions, in the name of “defeating Harper,” now intend to stump for the election of a Liberal or Liberal-NDP federal government that will provide a “progressive” face for the Canadian elite’s program of austerity and imperialist aggression.

To find a way forward, the CUPE strikers at York and UofT must break free from the grip of the union and build new organizations of struggle controlled by the rank-and-file. These committees would fight to broaden the strike by rallying support from students and the working class to reverse the attacks of the university administration and the Liberal government.

Above all, the development of such an orientation requires the fight to develop an understanding among workers and students of the fundamental *political* questions at stake—that to secure their interests, workers and students must embark on a path aimed at reorganizing society internationally on the basis of socialist principles.



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