

Toronto university strikes:

A socialist strategy to defeat austerity and defend education

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (Canada)
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Nine thousand education workers at the University of Toronto (U of T) and York University are entering a crucial third week on strike against school administration demands to maintain poverty wages for teaching assistants at U of T and erode tuition-increase protections for teaching and graduate assistants at York University.

While the strikers have shown great determination and militancy, their struggle is in grave danger of being strangled by the pro-capitalist trade unions.

From the beginning, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) has been determined to keep the dispute with the two universities within the narrowest confines of trade union collective bargaining.

No appeal has been made to the 100,000 students who attend York and the University of Toronto, let alone the hundreds of thousands of other students in the province, for a broad mobilization to defend public education as a social right. Nor is the strike being made a spearhead of a working-class counter-offensive against the austerity programs of the Ontario Liberal and federal Conservative governments.

Yet the conditions of low wages, precarious employment, and rising education costs faced by the striking education workers arise directly from the cuts to post-secondary education carried out by the Ontario and federal governments.

At U of T, teaching assistants are forced to labour under contracts that provide for a paltry \$15,000 per year in wages—well below the official poverty line. At York, the threat of massive increases to all graduate student tuition fees has already been heralded by the university's unilateral hiking of international graduate tuitions by a whopping \$7,000 under conditions where teaching and graduate assistants continue to work for low pay.

The drive by university administrations for ever more “cost-efficiencies,” moreover, impacts the entire student body. The quality of a university education continues to be eroded as universities more and more press to blend course

curriculum with the profit-driven demands of their corporate donors. Research is increasingly “corporatized” so that the learning experience becomes tied to the narrow requirements of business interests. Positions for tenured professorships are reduced. At York, 64 percent of classes are now being taught by graduate students, who have little prospect of ever securing a permanent university teaching post. At U of T, over 50 percent of course work is now undertaken by low-paid teaching assistants.

This onslaught on education will only deepen. Premier Kathleen Wynne has instituted measures to eliminate “duplication” at universities that will result in the downsizing and even elimination of whole departments.

In the face of this, what has been the response from CUPE and the rest of the trade unions?

They have supported the Wynne Liberal government! At their urging, the NDP sustained a minority Liberal government in office from October 2011 through last spring, even as it imposed massive social spending cuts, including a two-year public sector wage freeze, and criminalized public teacher job-action so as to impose sweeping concessions. And in last June's election the Ontario Federation of Labour and CUPE stumped for Wynne's re-election.

Based on the “success” of their campaign for “strategic voting” in the Ontario election the unions, in the name of “defeating Harper,” now intend to stump for the election of a Liberal or Liberal-NDP federal government. No matter that the Liberals when last in power in Ottawa carried out the biggest social spending cuts in Canadian history, led Canada to war in Yugoslavia and Afghanistan, and otherwise blazed the trail for Harper.

The unions' conduct of the education strikes against U of T and York flows from this pro-big business perspective.

Already, local members at U of T have had to defy the union to defend their basic interests, voting overwhelmingly to reject the recommendation of their own CUPE bargaining team for a tentative contract. At York, CUPE union

members in two of the three units have twice turned down proposed sell-out agreements—the most recent at a highly charged ratification vote held last week where scores of strikers bitterly denounced a representative of the National CUPE leadership, as well as the bargaining team that had recommended acceptance of a rotten deal.

At a poorly-attended demonstration half-heartedly organized by CUPE at the Queen's Park provincial legislature last week, the only demand that the union could muster to maintain their rapidly diminishing fig leaf of combativity was to plead for the two university administrations to "bargain fairly."

All this should come as no surprise.

The unions' real attitude to the austerity program of the ruling class was demonstrated by their hostility to the militant 2012 Quebec student strike. The unions isolated the striking students in the face of mounting police violence and anti-strike court injunctions, then tried to force on them an agreement that would have effectively implemented the government's university tuition-fee hikes. Several weeks later, when the Charest Liberal government's anti-strike Bill 78 provoked mass working class opposition, threatening to produce a situation akin to that in France May-June 1968, the unions moved decisively to shut down the student strike and harness the opposition to Charest to the election of a big business PQ government—as exemplified by their slogan "After the streets, the ballot box."

As for the trade union-backed NDP, it refused to provide even nominal support to the striking students or oppose Bill 78.

Efforts are now underway to break the resistance of the striking graduate students. At U of T, where the administration has refused to resume bargaining, the university has smoothed the way for union strike-breakers to re-start tutorials and labs. A private security firm has been engaged to police the strikers. In addition, some departments have approached undergraduates to perform tasks performed by striking teaching assistants. The union has failed to make any attempt to block the moves.

At York, the administration has re-started classes for the professional schools and will soon move to open classes again for all students. While thousands of students have signed petitions opposing the re-opening of classes and hundreds of professors have denounced the University's provocative plans, the York Faculty Association has stated that it cannot instruct its professors to honour the strikers' picket lines. Police, meanwhile, have harassed peaceful picket lines and threatened arrests. On top of all this, CUPE Local 3903, in a contemptible abandonment of the most basic principles of solidarity, has refused to urge the contract instructors—fellow Local 3903 members—to refuse to cross

picket lines after they ratified a separate deal last week.

This state of affairs was summed up succinctly by one York striker: "We are all out there trying to figure out strategies for dealing with the employer. But it's as if we are fighting this battle alone. We do not have any input from CUPE Ontario or CUPE National in terms of any kind of strategy. Why does CUPE just sit there while we do everything?"

To answer this question and chart a path forward requires strikers to grapple with some hard truths.

The ruling class assault will not be reversed by trade union struggle, no matter how militant. It requires a working class *political struggle* against the entire economic and political establishment and the capitalist social order.

The pro-capitalist unions, which have systematically suppressed the class struggle for decades, constitute the biggest obstacle to the mounting of such a struggle. Led by a privileged bureaucracy that agrees jobs, wages and the social needs of working people must be subordinated to capitalist profit, their role is not to advance strikers' demands, assist in mobilization and win disputes. It is to smother them, demoralize workers, and impose wage and other concessions. This is an experience common to any group of workers in Canada and internationally who seek to mount a struggle.

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

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.

All strikers, students and workers interested in learning more about the socialist perspective should read the *World Socialist Web Site* and contact the International Youth and Students for Social Equality .



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