

Toronto university strikes: Workers reject another sell-out contract

Dylan Lubao
24 March 2015

Striking teaching assistants, graders, and instructors at the University of Toronto (UofT) have rejected the latest sell-out contract negotiated by their union bargaining committee and the administration of Canada's largest university.

The offer, which was endorsed by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 3902 bargaining committee, was defeated 1,101 to 992 in a vote conducted over the weekend.

Six thousand education workers at UofT and a further three thousand teaching and graduate assistants at Toronto's other principal university, York, have been on strike for three weeks.

The TAs and contract instructors labour under a work regime notorious for its low pay and tenuous job security. The vast majority of the striking workers live under the official provincial poverty line, sometimes earning little more than \$15,000 per year despite often working over 40 hours per week and teaching the majority of their respective universities' courses, labs and tutorials.

Moreover, the incomes of those who are graduate students—i.e. the vast majority—are threatened by rising tuitions and, in the case of York, administration attempts to overturn a tuition fee-rebate system. Already international students at York have seen a whopping \$7,000 per year increase in their fees.

The rejected contract at UofT included an increase in the minimum funding package for each worker from \$15,000 to \$17,500. Even this paltry increase would still have left workers below Ontario's official individual poverty line of \$19,930. Furthermore, it has been pointed out that the university administration offered the funds as a lump sum to the union and made no provisions for providing future workers with the same level of funding.

Despite ballots being held at UofT's three campuses, only one third of those on strike turned up to vote, underscoring the growing level of anger and distrust among the rank and file for the CUPE brass.

At every juncture, CUPE leaders have sought to divide and isolate the striking workers, while putting forward one sell-

out contract after another—contracts that have been repeatedly rejected. Two weeks ago, at a contract ratification meeting held at York, rank-and-file workers directed their anger at national and local CUPE officials who cynically attempted to portray a sell-out deal as a “historic” achievement.

The sentiments of the rank-and-file educators are not misplaced. At York, CUPE has split the membership, organizing a separate deal for 1,000 contract instructors, who narrowly agreed upon reduced wage increases in exchange for a modest increase in the number of instructors who will be offered permanent employment.

In the face of the decisions by administrators at both UofT and York to resume classes in spite of the strike, the CUPE leadership has spinelessly begged these belligerent employers to “bargain fairly”. They have made no appeal to the more than 40,000 students in Quebec who have launched an “anti-austerity” strike, nor to the hundreds of thousands of university students at schools across Canada to support a broader struggle against the attack on education by all levels of government.

And CUPE has worked might and main to straitjacket the strike within the confines of trade union collective bargaining, opposing mounting a working-class challenge to the austerity agenda being pursued by all levels of government and all the establishment parties from coast to coast.

A CUPE-organized march and rally on Saturday, which was timed to coincide with the UofT ratification vote, marked yet another occasion for senior union officials and their supporters to make demagogic statements of solidarity with the striking workers and opposition to austerity, while duplicitously omitting any mention of their role in both suppressing the strike and bringing the big-business Ontario Liberals to power in last June's provincial elections.

The remarks by John Cartwright, President of the Toronto and York Region Labour Council, were characteristic of the empty bombast regularly spewed by the union officialdom to conceal their betrayals of the working class. “We are all

fighting austerity. Whether we're at York, U of T, or Crown [Holdings], we face the same struggle. We must stand against the agenda of Harper and Queen's Park [the Ontario Legislature]. We've got to build a movement to challenge and replace them!"

These lines are fraudulent on many levels.

Particularly odious is the reference to the strike of 120 metal workers at Crown Holdings in Toronto, who are represented by the United Steelworkers Union (USW). For a year-and-a-half, the USW leadership and the Toronto Labour Council that Cartwright heads have left these workers at the mercy of Crown management, which has committed to permanently replacing the striking workers with scabs.

Even more audacious are any claims by the union bureaucracy to "challenge" and "replace" the regime at Queen's Park, given the pivotal role the union officialdom played last year in returning the Ontario Liberals of Kathleen Wynne to power with a parliamentary majority. Myriad union bigwigs lauded the budget that the Liberals introduced just before the election, calling it the most "progressive" they'd seen in years, even as Wynne announced a three-year spending freeze beginning this year that will translate, when inflation and population growth are taken into account, into a real cut of 10 percent or more.

The union bureaucracy nationwide is set to reprise this strategy in this year's federal election, working, in the name of "stopping Harper," to elect a Liberal or Liberal-NDP coalition government that will provide a "progressive" face to implementing the Canadian elite's program of austerity and imperialist aggression.

Many striking workers who spoke to *World Socialist Web Site* reporters at Saturday's rally pointed to the deep divide between the rank and file and the well-heeled bureaucrats who staff the higher echelons of the union apparatus.

"There are clearly CUPE leaders who want this strike to finish early," said Michael, a York PhD candidate and teaching assistant. "There is some militancy, but it's among the actual worker-students and some of the local leadership."

Another York teaching assistant and local union organizer, who asked not to be named, elaborated on the indifference and abject treachery of CUPE leadership, and the immense pressures that workers were placed under to accept any deal tabled by the bargaining team.

"There's definitely a disparity between the local and the national union. CUPE has us striking for upwards of 20 hours a week, although we fall below the 40-hour workweek that the rule usually applies to. It's really tough for those of us who commute long distances, who are getting paid a pittance for this. It's definitely more militant down here on the ground.

"I understand why Unit 2 (York) voted 'yes' on that deal. As I understand it, the offer of childcare that the university made was pretty enticing to them, and of course, the number of tenure track conversions was relatively attractive too. But remember what horrible conditions they were coming from. It's definitely complicated things for us, because now we have a situation where basically one set of us can go to work, while the other set is still on strike. Although many in Unit 2 have promised us that they won't cross the picket line.

"There's been talk of a wildcat strike if we're offered another sell-out contract, but I couldn't say how serious it is. It's definitely in the air though.

"I know that these working conditions affect many workers across the province. I would support a general strike, personally, although because I am a union organizer I can't make that my official opinion."

WSWS reporters also spoke to several undergraduate students who went to the rally to show their solidarity for the striking workers, many of whom are their instructors.

"As an undergrad, higher fees don't translate to a quality education," said Kebz, an undergrad studying neuroscience at UofT. "We're paying more because there's an underfunding of postsecondary education. There's a lot of double-talk coming from the universities. They say they want to educate the next generation, but really they're just about profit.

"What I want isn't just reforms. I really think we need revolutionary change, from the grassroots.

"But there's a political gap between the leaders and the rank and file. We won't gain anything if the situation remains like this. There's totally a labour aristocracy, so that's why the push has gotta come from the grassroots."



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact