

Toronto university strikes end

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Striking teaching and graduate assistants at Toronto's York University voted Tuesday afternoon to accept tentative contract settlements ending a month-long strike. This was the third time the education workers had voted on proposed agreements, having twice previously rejected deals put forward by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 3903 bargaining team. Of the 2,700 workers in the two bargaining units, less than 1,000 cast ballots, voting overwhelmingly in favour of ratifying the new contracts.

Initially, 3,700 education workers had struck the university, but at the second ratification ballot on March 9, 1,000 contract instructors voted to accept a separate deal. Although all of the striking workers were organized by CUPE, the union leadership then divided the local membership by refusing to issue instructions for the contract teachers to honour the picket lines of their striking colleagues. Despite the union's crass betrayal of worker solidarity, many instructors—joined by some tenured staff and large sections of the student body—nonetheless refused to cross picket lines, throwing the university administration's plans to resume classes into disarray.

The just-ratified deal reached with the York University administration will pare back graduate student tuition increases, indexing them to 2012 levels. In addition, LGBTQ would become an employment equity group, funding for graduate assistants will be boosted during the summer months, and the education workers will receive 100 percent of the pay they lost during the strike.

Even after these contract amendments, York education workers will continue to live well below the province's official poverty line of \$19,300—a fact omitted in the official union statement which was headlined “Employer Capitulates.” The union statement went on to breathlessly exclaim that the new agreements are “precedent-setting” and “a massive, massive gain.”

Union officials and various pseudo-left groups are now trumpeting the York deal as a “great victory,” one, moreover, that demonstrates the vitality of the trade unions. This is truly grasping at straws. So successfully have the pro-capitalist unions suppressed the class struggle in recent

decades that a union contract that adds a handful of improvements whilst maintaining a system of poverty wages, deteriorating learning conditions, and high tuitions is paraded as a “massive gain.”

Moreover, even the modest contract improvements were won not because of the national and local CUPE leaderships, but in spite of them. “This is the best deal you are going to get,” warned one union spokesperson from the podium, to howls of protest from the March 9 mass membership meeting that concluded with two of the three bargaining units defeating an attempt to push through concessionary contracts.

And then, even more importantly, there is the bigger picture.

From the outset of the York strike and a similar dispute at the University of Toronto, CUPE worked to quarantine them so as to ensure that they did not become the catalyst for a working class challenge to the provincial Liberal government's net-zero policy (that prescribes that new public sector contracts must not raise labour costs in their first two years) and its austerity agenda as a whole.

CUPE was determined to confine the dispute with Toronto's principal universities within the narrowest confines of trade union collective bargaining. Yet the conditions of low wages, precarious employment, and rising education costs faced by university workers arise directly from the cuts to post-secondary education carried out by Ontario and federal governments.

Unmentioned in the celebratory union press releases is the continued collusion of CUPE and the Ontario Federation of Labour with the Liberal government of Premier Kathleen Wynne and its austerity policies. CUPE officials and the Ontario Federation of Labour have long provided political support to the Ontario Liberals. This includes: urging the New Democratic Party (NDP) to prop up the Liberals in the provincial legislature during nearly three years of minority government (October 2011-May 2014), as the Liberals imposed sweeping social spending cuts and illegalized public school teacher job action; and openly campaigning for the Liberals' return to power in last June's election.

Based on the “success” of their campaign for “strategic

voting” in the last 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 that will provide a more “progressive” face for the continued implementation of the Canadian elite’s program of austerity and imperialist aggression.

All those union officials and their supporters in the “professoriat” who are using the outcome of the York strike to promote the viability of CUPE and the pro-capitalist unions as a whole, are throwing sand in the faces of workers and students. By quarantining the strike, limiting it to a handful of extremely modest demands (largely revolving around rebuffing employer concession demands), then hailing the ensuing result as a massive victory, these forces are helping sustain the unions’ alliance with the Liberals and greasing the wheels for the Wynne government’s continued attacks on workers’ living standards and social and public services, not least public education.

Meanwhile, at the University of Toronto (U of T), 6,000 striking education workers, also members of CUPE, went back to work last Friday after voting 942 for and 318 against to send all unresolved contract issues to binding arbitration. In that dispute as well, workers had already twice voted down proposed tentative agreements endorsed by the local union.

Solidarizing the union with the administration, Curtis Forbes, a member of the CUPE bargaining committee at U of T stated, “We recognize that what the university wants is exactly what we want ... everybody back in the classroom, teaching the classes, as soon as possible.”

At both universities, workers had initially voted by large margins to strike against poverty wages, steeply rising tuition fees, poor job security and the concomitant dilution of the quality of post-secondary education in Ontario. Currently, over 52 percent of all classes in the province’s universities are taught by precariously employed graduate student teaching assistants and contract instructors. That number is steadily growing. At York, 64 percent of classes are taught by non-tenured staff.

The return-to-work at U of T was facilitated by a backhanded, anti-democratic manoeuvre by the CUPE Local 3902 executive. While they had initially said a press conference at 11 a.m. last Thursday would provide no more than an update on the strike, CUPE leaders instead announced they were convening an emergency meeting for 2 p.m. to vote on their recommendation the strike be ended through binding arbitration. Only 1,260 striking workers—a mere sliver of the 6,000 total, and even less than the 2,000 who voted to reject the last sell-out deal—turned up for that vote. The small turnout was a product of the union leadership’s scheme to stampede through a return to work,

as well as the growing rank-and-file anger and distrust toward the union.

Absolutely none of the U of T workers’ demands for earning a decent wage or obtaining a semblance of job security were met during the course of the strike. Yet, CUPE argues, they can now rest assured that a “non-partisan” arbitrator appointed by the big-business Liberal government will attend to their demands.

But if the union bargaining team, ostensibly representing the interests of the workers, had no qualms with presenting one concessions-laden contract after another to the rank-and-file, why will an arbitrator, appointed by a Liberal government, which in 2008 legislated striking York workers back to work, act any differently?

During the course of the university strikes, supporters of the Socialist Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality received a wide hearing amongst strikers and students. Thousands of copies of articles and statements from the *World Socialist Web Site* were distributed warning about the perfidy of the union officialdom and advancing the need to mobilize the working class as an independent political force to secure education as a social right and defeat the austerity agenda of big business. These warnings did not fall on deaf ears. In discussions throughout the month of March, striker after striker bitterly denounced the CUPE leadership and vowed to wage their fight not only against the university administrations but the union leadership as well.

Workers everywhere must break free from the grip of the unions and build new organizations of struggle controlled by the rank-and-file. 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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