

Ontario Liberals move to criminalize teachers' strikes

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Ontario's trade union-backed Liberal government has moved to outlaw secondary school teachers' strikes that have affected three of the province's largest local school boards—Durham and Peel, in the Greater Toronto area, and Rainbow, which covers the Sudbury region.

Last Friday, Education Minister Liz Sandals approached the little-known Education Relations Commission for a declaration that the strikes are putting the school year of 70,000 high school students in jeopardy.

The government plans to use a finding by the Education Relations Commission against the strikes as the pretext for introducing legislation outlawing teacher job action just as they did in 2013.

A ruling against the strikes is all but a foregone conclusion. The Commission's members were all hand-picked by the government.

Sandal's appeal to the Commission was enough to convince leaders of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSTF) to return to the bargaining table starting tomorrow.

Additionally, the three secondary school boards affected by the strike have filed suit with the provincial Labour Relations Board for an order declaring the strikes illegal. They argue that the strikes are in breach of the two-tier contract bargaining system the Liberals established last year under legislation that was passed with the support of the union-allied New Democratic Party (NDP).

The Boards have said they will provide video and other evidence to show that strikes are not chiefly about local issues. "It's quite clear from the rhetoric," charges Durham District School Board Chair Michael Barrett, the strike is "primarily to force negotiation at the provincial table and that's quite illegal."

The province's public school teachers have been

without a contract since August of last year. They are confronting a government that in the name of balancing the budget is mounting a frontal assault on public education, including forcing school closures, demanding increased class sizes and imposing cuts in teachers' real wages.

Yet, as they did in 2012-2013 when the government demanded a two-year wage freeze and the slashing of sick benefits, the various teacher unions are limiting teacher job action and dividing teachers by district, level, and language stream.

The Durham secondary school teachers have been on strike since April 20, and those in the Sudbury region and in Peel (Mississauga-Brampton) since April 27 and May 4 respectively.

Two other OSSTF regions are to begin "work-to-rule" campaigns today.

In addition, 76,000 elementary school teachers represented by the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario (ETFO) began what the union calls a "work-to-rule" campaign last week. The union has instructed teachers to perform all necessary teaching duties and oversee extracurricular activities, but to refrain from administering provincially-regulated standardized tests and providing parents with detailed comments on student report cards.

Bill 122, or the School Boards Collective Bargaining Act, is a flagrant attack on teachers' right to strike. It forces the teachers' unions to bargain on two levels, with big-ticket concerns such as salary and classroom sizes negotiated at the provincial level and less significant and costly issues relating to working conditions negotiated with individual school boards.

The current negotiations are taking place under the government's "net zero" framework whereby any increase to salaries or benefits must be offset by

savings in other areas of the contract.

Central to the teachers' grievances are plans by the Liberals to slash the quality of public education, primarily by increasing class sizes and teachers' workloads. Teachers have been asked to take on additional supervisory duties during their regular out-of-classroom time such as lunch and recess, which would likely double their daily work hours. The province is also pushing to diminish teachers' autonomy in running their own classrooms, proposing that principals and school administration play a larger role, especially with regards to student testing.

The attacks on public education in Ontario mirror those being mounted by governments across North America, and are a continuation of the austerity campaign being waged by the Liberals and the entire political establishment to make the working class shoulder the cost of the protracted global economic crisis.

Just three years ago, the Liberals, under the leadership of the so-called "Education Premier" Dalton McGuinty, launched a ferocious assault on public school teachers and tens of thousands of other public sector workers. With the full support of the opposition Conservatives, the Liberals imposed a two-year public sector wage freeze and criminalized teacher job action using the notorious Bill 115, the so-called "Putting Students First Act."

The NDP claimed to oppose Bill 115. But this was a sham. It supported the budget in which the Liberals announced their wage freeze and continued to prop up the then minority Liberal government in the legislature for close to two years after Bill 115's adoption.

Under the concessionary contracts imposed by government fiat under Bill 115, the Liberals also slashed teachers' annual sick leave from 20 to 10 days, abolished the right to bank sick-days and receive a payout upon retirement, and delayed the application of seniority-grid pay increases for new teachers. Two-and-a-half-years on, a majority Liberal government under the leadership of Premier Kathleen Wynne is deepening the attack on teachers and public education.

The response of the ETFO and OSSTF union officialdom has been, as ever, to adopt a posture of opposition, the better to conceal their support and that of the union bureaucracy as a whole for the Wynne Liberal government.

The unions have refused to mobilize their memberships in a province-wide challenge to the "net zero" strictures of the government, preferring instead to confine the dispute within the narrow confines of collective bargaining by authorizing what amounts to little more than face-saving work-to-rule actions and a few selective local strikes. Their conduct stands in stark contrast to the militancy of rank-and-file teachers who fought bitterly against the last Liberal assault, even striking in defiance of Bill 115.

Tellingly, Canadian Labour Congress President Hassan Yussuff met with Wynne last week in "back channel discussions" to convince her that the teachers' unions were prepared to make a deal that would satisfy the government. Yussuff's assumption of a role normally undertaken by the leadership of the Ontario Federation of Labour is bound up with the union leadership's fears that a working-class challenge to the Wynne Liberal government and its austerity agenda would disrupt their plans to promote the federal Liberals as a "progressive" alternative to Harper and work for the coming to power of a Liberal-NDP coalition government in next fall's election.

The move by Yussuff follows on a similar intervention he made in last year's British Columbia teachers' dispute. Just as that strike was beginning to provoke a broader working class movement against the government of Liberal BC Premier Christy Clark, Yussuff intervened to bring it to a quick end. He flew to BC to meet with Clark and assure her that the unions had no intention of challenging the Liberals' right to govern. Soon after, that strike was wound up and a contract signed that provided the government with virtually every demand it had made at the bargaining table.



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