

An educational Walmart

Ontario-wide community college teachers on strike

Carl Bronski
18 October 2017

Twelve thousand professors, instructors, counselors and librarians walked out on strike Monday at 24 community colleges across the province of Ontario. The teachers, who are members of the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU), are opposing the relentless increase in low-paid, temporary and precarious work contracts and the curtailment of academic freedom from the increased influence of corporate interests in the educational system. Such has been the transformation of the college system under governments of all political stripes, that it is known today as the “Educational WalMart.”

Currently about 80 percent of workers are employed on short-term or part-time contracts, many of whom are hired on 13-week, low-load contracts with no job security and inferior wages and conditions. Average annual pay even for full-time contract employees is less than \$30,000 (US\$24,008).

In negotiations, the OPSEU bargaining committee has proposed that this disparity be reduced so that no more than half of the workforce is subjected to such precarious terms of employment, which the union stated was “the bare minimum” needed “to ensure quality education for students and to treat faculty fairly.”

For their own part, the College Employer Council representing management has rejected the union proposals outright, asserting their corporate “right” to organize the educational system as they see fit. “The bargaining is about enshrining a rigid staffing level that effects how you conduct your operations, and we are not prepared to bargain that,” said Council CEO Don Sinclair.

For Sinclair, as for every other corporate CEO,

management ascribes to itself an inviolable power to destroy the living standards of its employees in a never-ending race to the bottom. This simultaneously compromises the right of the 500,000 students enrolled in the system to any semblance of a quality public education. Of course, Sinclair's austerity did not include the senior executives of the colleges. Earlier this year, a number of colleges forwarded requests for 50 percent salary hikes for their presidents.

When the provincial community college system was established in 1965, the vast majority of instructors were hired on a full-time basis. Members of the College Employer Council were appointed directly by the provincial Minister of Education. Government funding of the colleges accounted for over 80 percent of operating revenues. Tuition fees topped out at no more than 15 percent of total revenues. As late as 1992, government funding comprised 77 percent of college revenue. But the brutal social service budgets by consecutive federal and Ontario governments—including under the social democratic New Democratic Party (NDP) administration of Bob Rae—has steadily altered the educational landscape.

Today, government funding comprises only 44 percent of community college budgets—the lowest ratio of any province in Canada. The percentage of precarious employment contracts has ballooned. The College Employer Council is no longer appointed by government, but draws its members independently and largely from the private sector. Corporate partnerships with private for-profit and largely unregulated colleges compromise ever growing portions of revenue as colleges contract on-line teaching services, procure “courses in a can” from publishing houses, imperil

academic freedom by selling curriculum control to corporate sponsors and even appropriate teacher lectures for future profit.

To administer these schemes, there is now one administrator for every three full-time faculty members—four times the rate in the public high school system. Increasingly indebted students pay on average \$5,000 per semester, or 33 percent of the college operating budgets, even as class sizes can comprise as many as several hundred students.

The current strike action is the fourth since the community colleges were founded. In 1984, the Conservative government of Bill Davis legislated the teachers back to work after an 18-day strike. A particularly bitter strike in 2006 saw the death of 62-year-old teacher John Stammers, who was hit by a car on the picket line. No charges were ever laid. That 20-day strike ended when OPSEU agreed to final arbitration that failed to address the demands of the teachers. In 2010, management employed “final offer” provisions in the Ontario Labour Code to force a vote among the teachers who narrowly accepted the concessionary deal before a strike was called.

A WSWS reporting team spoke with strikers at Fanshawe College in London, Ontario on the first day of the strike. Several of the strikers asked that their names not be used so as to prevent victimization by management on future contract work.

Picket captain Jeff Miles said, “We have contracts here that only go semester to semester. A part-timer can have a full complement of hours one semester and nothing the next. Plus we are laid off for the summer. There is definitely a shortage of money from the province. A partial load is only 9 to 12 hours a week. Some only do 3 to 6.”

A sessional instructor told the WSWS, “This crap has been going on for decades but it’s getting to the point where almost everyone is getting screwed one way or another. It’s not this government or that government—it’s all of them. They all embrace this neoliberal austerity point of view. NDP, Conservatives, Liberals—I don’t trust any of them. Politics in this country are hopeless.”

A full-time contractor explained, “There are very few benefits for us. We have to pay \$50 dollars a month out of pocket for dental coverage. The part-timers are even in worse shape. They have no benefits at all.”

Brian, a full-time Information Technology teacher said, “I’m not out on strike for myself. I’ll be OK. I’m out here for the part-time instructors. I would much rather be teaching but there comes a time when you have to take a stand.”

A student supporting the strike added, “Of course, it’s tough to pay tuition and not have classes but I don’t blame the faculty. It’s insane that most of the teachers are on part-time contracts. They just come and go and aren’t able to give us the attention we need. I support them because I’m part of a generation that is uneasy about ever getting a full-time job.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact