

Education is a social right!

Students must come to the defense of Ontario's striking college teachers!

International Youth and Students for Social Equality (Canada)
7 November 2017

Now in its fourth week, the strike Ontario college teachers are waging in opposition to precarious employment is in imminent danger. If the strike is not to be isolated and defeated, the struggle must be broadened, mobilizing students and young people, as well as teachers and other workers across Canada, in a political struggle to defend public education and win decent-paying, secure jobs for all.

What is at stake is not only the working conditions and job security of the 12,000 faculty employed in Ontario's provincially-funded and administered college system, but, more fundamentally, the fate of public education itself. In recent decades, and especially since the 2008 global financial crisis, federal and provincial governments of all political stripes, from the Liberals and Conservatives to the NDP, have mounted, in the name of austerity and balanced budgets, an unrelenting cross-Canada assault on public education and other vital public and social services.

The assault on Ontario College faculty, the majority of whom are employed on short-term contracts, is a further step in the gutting of the public education system, which is itself part of a generalized assault on the entire working class. A counter-offensive has to be mounted! But the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) is already preparing to run up the white flag. J.P. Hornick, chair of the college faculty bargaining team, revealed that the union has already made undisclosed concessions to reach a negotiated settlement, declaring, "The faculty has moved several times."

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) rejects with contempt the calls of various college student associations for Kathleen Wynne's big business provincial Liberal government to "intervene" in the dispute and press OPSEU and the College Employer Council (CEC) to "compromise." The student associations are dividing students from teachers, when they should be forming common cause to fight to defend public education against the predations of big business and their political hirelings.

Far from being "neutral," Wynne and her Liberals are the political masters of the CEC and as such have for years slashed funding for post-secondary education and imposed wage austerity on public sector workers, while cutting taxes for big business and the rich.

Any government intervention would be aimed at enforcing the concessionary demands of the college bosses, who according to a *Globe and Mail* article earlier this year are expecting salary increases of more than 50 percent after Wynne's Liberals lifted a five-year salary cap for senior public servants.

Recent history has provided harsh lessons on what workers can expect from the Ontario Liberals. In 2012, in the face of mounting opposition to its austerity agenda, the provincial Liberal government, then led by Dalton McGuinty, enacted Bill 115 to illegalize all job action by the province's public school teachers and impose wage-cutting contracts on them by government decree.

In 2015, teaching assistants and education workers at York University and University of Toronto went on strike over poverty wages and the absence of job security, only for the struggle to be isolated and betrayed by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), a major ally of the Liberals, both in Ontario and at the federal level.

The unions' despicable role in isolating and smothering every struggle workers have mounted for job security and better wages—including the recent strikes against GM's CAMI assembly plant and Swissport's operations at Toronto airport—flows directly from their intimate partnership with the big business Liberals at the provincial and federal level. In the name of defeating the hard-right Conservatives, Ontario's unions have backed the election of a succession of Liberal governments under McGuinty and Wynne that have slashed social spending to the bone, criminalized strike action, and privatized public utilities.

This collaboration was the prelude to the unions' 2015 "strategic voting" campaign in support of Justin Trudeau's

Liberals. Like Wynne, Trudeau uses “progressive rhetoric,” including the promotion of a “diversity” agenda that is meant to obscure their defence of ever-widening social inequality, while pursuing policies that would make Stephen Harper proud. These include massive new arms expenditures, a scheme to privatize much of the country’s transport and social infrastructure, and pursuit of a close partnership with the Trump administration, the most right-wing government in modern American history.

Thus, when we state that students must come to the support of striking teachers, this does not at all imply support for the trade union apparatus. These pro-capitalist organizations are tied by a thousand threads to the parties of the ruling establishment. For decades they have suppressed the class struggle, imposing concessions and enforcing anti-strike laws. They cannot be pressured to fight on behalf of workers.

The attitude of the unions and of the social-democratic NDP to a genuine challenge to austerity was exemplified by their attitude to the 2012 Quebec student strike, which at its height threatened to become the catalyst for a working-class upsurge. The unions isolated the students, who were fighting massive tuition fee hikes, in the face of an unprecedented campaign of police violence; then, when hundreds of thousands of workers came out into the streets to protest a vicious Quebec Liberal government law that effectively illegalized the strike, the unions announced they would enforce it, and redoubled their efforts to harness the opposition to austerity to the big business Parti Quebecois.

As for the NDP, it refused to provide even nominal support for the student strike, declaring it a “provincial” matter.

Conditions in Ontario’s public college system provide a stark example of the disastrous consequences of the unions’ repeated betrayals. While tuition has risen to anything from between \$2,700 and \$6,000 per year depending on the program and level of study, the student-to-teacher ratio has more than doubled from 1989. A ratio of 30:1 in 2015 meant the number of full-time faculty had dropped by 1,000, even though student numbers had risen by 100,000.

When the provincial community college system was established in 1965, instructors were typically hired full-time. The CEC, which represents Ontario’s 24 colleges, was made up of provincial appointees. Now, these colleges are only nominally delivering a public service and are increasingly under the control of, and run like, private corporations.

As late as 1992, government funding comprised 77 percent of college revenue. Today, it amounts to just 44 percent of community college budgets—the lowest ratio of any province in Canada.

Currently about 80 percent of workers are employed on short-term or part-time contracts, with many subsisting 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.

This precarious situation is not particular to the community college staff in Ontario—far from it. Low-paying jobs, contract- and part-time work, and unemployment are becoming the norm for masses of working people, in Canada and internationally.

Meanwhile, under the fraudulent pretext that there is “no money” for public services and social programs, the bourgeoisie has taken the axe to public spending and ordered workers to do more with less. All the while, money is being showered on the richest layers of society, and billions are being wasted on their wars, as seen by Trudeau’s commitment to hike military spending by 70 percent by 2026.

Those hardest hit by these policies will be young people. That is why they should see the fight of faculty members as part of their own struggle and turn to the working class—the only force that has the social power to challenge and defeat big business.

Students should join with teachers to form strike committees at every college to take control of the strike out of the hands of the OPSEU bureaucracy, issue appeals to workers and students at all levels of education across Ontario and Canada, and broaden the strike.

We urge students and young people to take up the fight to unify the struggles of the working class across Canada and internationally and place them on a new axis. To defend and expand public education and social and democratic rights, a political fight is required. The working class must organize independently of, and in opposition to, the trade unions and fight for socialism—that is, the reorganization of socioeconomic life under a workers’ government to make social needs, and not the private profit of a tiny clique of capitalists, the animating principle.

Students who agree with this perspective should contact the International Youth and Students for Social Equality.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact