

“We have to know that we’re fighting the same fight”

## Striking Ontario college faculty speak out

**Our reporters**  
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For almost one month, 12,000 Ontario community college professors, instructors, counsellors and librarians have been on strike to win wage increases after years of pay “restraint,” greater academic freedom, and job security for low-paid contract workers.

The corporate press has characterized the striking workers as obstinate and unreasonable in their demands. On the other hand, the College Employer Council (CEC) has been portrayed as a fair and exasperated party to the negotiations, whose members’ overriding concern is the well-being of the province’s half-million college students. The truth is this body of high-salaried managers and administrators is determined to uphold the precarious working conditions and low wages that are undermining the college system for students and teachers alike.

In recent days, the provincial Liberal government, which has repeatedly criminalized job action by workers, has signaled that it stands ready to legalize the strike. Emboldened by the government’s support and union retreats at the bargaining table, the CEC is now availing itself of anti-worker legislation to compel the strikers to vote on its “final” offer—a proposed contract that would meet none of their demands.

The thoughts and perspectives of the workers themselves are almost nowhere to be found. The potted comments of Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) union officials are not aimed at mobilizing workers to fight for their entirely justified demands, but at reaching an accommodation with management and imposing a sell-out deal on its members. OPSEU has acknowledged the bankruptcy of its own leadership by announcing that the issue of job security will not be resolved in the current strike, instead shunted off to a committee for further study.

Educators on the picket line at George Brown College in Toronto were eager to share their thoughts on the strike with a WSWs reporting team.

“The strike is about taking a principled position on workers’ rights,” began one full-time professor in the college’s Social & Community Services Department.

“This strike is against the precarity that’s happening in post-secondary education, but also happening everywhere else as well,” he continued. “That is linked to working with dignity in the educational system. It’s linked to being able to deliver quality education, and that’s linked to the wider health and sustainability of all our communities. It is a large struggle that has many far-reaching goals.”

Ed Ksenych, a full-time sociology professor, elaborated on the pervasiveness of part-time teaching contracts and administrative control over the curriculum—the two primary issues in the strike.

“One of the decisions they’ve made is to increasingly hire contract faculty. Four-fifths of the faculty here are contract faculty, working in very precarious positions,” he explained.

“We are fighting for equal pay for equal work, contract faculty or not,” added Ed. “They are not getting paid what full-time staff are paid, despite doing the same work. Administration has done that by not paying them for evaluation and preparatory time.”

“Another reason why I think we’re out on strike is that faculty have been excluded from important decision-making and input, particularly with regard to our work and academics.”

When asked about working conditions for contract faculty, a partial-load professor in the Social Work program described the situation faced by the 81 percent of instructors who fall into this category. “We are hired every four months, or not hired,” he explained. “There’s no way to know until you get that contract and sign it. You could get hired for the same course five times in a row, and then someone else could get that, and there’s no recourse really. You could get all new courses every term.”

“Every time you teach a new course, it’s a huge learning curve for the instructor. It’s challenging. It’s evenings and weekends. There’s very little in the way of a downtime anymore.”

“That does impact the classroom in the end,” he added. “You have to take shortcuts sometimes. How can you learn the material you want to be teaching so that you can speak

from a place of expertise in the classroom, and at the same time provide meaningful feedback, all with a huge amount of volume?”

Chris, a counsellor, added, “For contract faculty, they don’t get much prescribed in the way of course preparation. They’re just given the course outline and told ‘just go and develop this whole course.’ But you’re only paid for the nine hours that you’re actually in the class.

“So, yeah, you earn 80 bucks an hour for those nine hours. But that gets whittled down when you’re working twenty extra hours a week, because you’re having to prepare all your materials.”

Pointing to the broader political issue of attacks on public education and attacks on democratic rights, a social work professor commented, “When you’re precarious, you’re afraid to stand up for the values and principles of public education for fear of blacklisting.

“Post-secondary education, whether it’s university or college, are democratic spaces. We produce the future populations and leaders of a democratic society. But if you’re afraid to stand up for principles of equity, social justice, critical thinking, then you won’t have those values in your future society. You’re de-democratizing our society. That’s what we stand against. This is all connected.”

“The strike is a key moment in Ontario,” noted her colleague. “We’re trying to create opportunities for the public to understand. I’m on the bus, someone asks me why you’re striking, I tell them, ‘Oh, do you know that we have 81 percent part-timers?’ And people on the bus go, ‘What!’ It is beyond belief that this is how our educational system is functioning.”

In an attempt to pit students against their professors, the media has given prominence to a campaign by several college student associations demanding that both sides quickly reach an agreement.

For Ed Ksenych and his colleagues, the pressures faced by students are deeply connected to the issues at stake in the strike.

“I’m not doing this for me,” he told the WSWs. “I voted to go out on strike for the contract faculty and because of what I saw happening negatively not just recently but over many years to my students.

“One of the worst things that’s been happening has been the intensification of teaching and learning—shortening the semesters, downloading more onto students’ backs. We’ve seen that our students are not handling this well. Mental health issues are going up. I see them struggling in class just to stay awake, because they’re working at the same time that they’re trying to complete a degree.

“If you take a look at the root of the word ‘school,’ it comes from the Greek word for leisure. It’s the one thing

our students do not have. We did have it in my generation. We had time to actually learn. Right now everything is so under pressure that the students are under immense distress. Mostly time distress, but add on to that economic distress as well.”

Shelly Mehta, a professor of Early Childhood Education, emphasized that the rank-and-file educators place the students first, despite the often inadequate resources.

“Our department goes above and beyond to accommodate students,” she said. “Other departments do the same, we really do cater to our students, but it’s difficult. I’m the coordinator for the first year of the program, and adding on seventy students to my load with the same hours is tough, because you’re finding that workload just increases, and it’s draining. There are a few students out there that I’m personally concerned about. These classes are their safety net, and they’re not here, so I worry about them.”

Shelly’s colleague Rachel Brophy, a professor in the same department, urged students to join their struggle.

“I wish they would be more engaged, because that kind of solidarity would strengthen the fight,” she said. “What’s happening here has such an impact on them as students, but it will also impact on them once they are working.”

When asked how educators and the working class as a whole should carry forward the fight against capitalist austerity, in the face of the routine defeats of isolated strikes, Rachel replied, “We have to know that we are fighting the same fight, we’re battling the same issues at our workplaces, even though we work for different institutions. It’s a workforce battle, in terms of contract work, decent pay, job stability.

“Maybe it’s a lesson that we need to collaborate—a united front.”



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