

# Ontario colleges issue ultimatum to striking faculty

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Twelve thousand Ontario community college faculty are entering the second month of a strike against poverty wages, precarious temporary contracts, and a lack of academic freedom, after the colleges' bargaining agent walked away from negotiations on November 6. The workers have been on strike since October 16.

The Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU), which represents the striking faculty, and the College Employer Council (CEC), which represents Ontario's twenty-four provincially-funded and -administered colleges, have accused each other of stalling the negotiations.

Making use of a reactionary provision of the Ontario labour code, the CEC has announced that it will bypass OPSEU and put its "final" offer to a direct vote of the rank-and-file, scheduled for November 14 to 16, with the aim of enforcing its concession demands.

Both sides were called back to the bargaining table on Thursday, November 2 by the Liberal-led provincial Labour Department. According to the union bargaining team, an agreement with the CEC was within reach by the following Sunday night. However the next morning, the CEC tabled additional concessions; then informed the union it was suspending negotiations and would apply to the Ontario Labour Relations Board to hold a direct vote on its "final" offer.

The content of OPSEU's botched "agreement" with the employers confirms the warnings made by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE). In a recent statement, the IYSSE urged students to join their professors on strike, conduct the struggle independent of OPSEU, and transform it into a broader working class struggle against the attack on public education. The IYSSE argued that the union was "already preparing to run up the white flag" and sell out the strike.

True to form, OPSEU has effectively dropped its demand for at least 50 percent of faculty to be given permanent employment, whether full or part-time. Currently, four-fifths of the colleges' educators are hired on precarious, temporary contracts, meaning they have no job security and receive

only a fraction of the pay and benefits full-time staff receive for doing the same work.

Calling it a "significant gain," OPSEU has agreed to shelve its limited job security demand in return for the establishment of a provincial task force that will examine and make non-binding recommendations on the question of precarious work.

As many faculty members on the picket line passionately explained to a WSWs reporting team earlier this week, the fight against precarious work and for equal pay for equal work is the key issue animating the strike. Contract faculty struggle to make ends meet, with many earning less than \$30,000 per year. Many have to work multiple jobs to piece together the semblance of full-time employment.

Despite this, the union bureaucracy is treating the task force as the best possible outcome and relegating the precarious work issue to the background. The OPSEU bureaucracy has quickly moved to highlight the issue of academic freedom as the main sticking point in negotiations, in order to hide the fact that they have already abandoned the workers' main demands.

The CEC, having taken the measure of the union bureaucracy, feels confident that it can push through its concessions demands. These include measures to compel full-time professors to work unlimited overtime, as well as the continuation of management's stranglehold over course curriculum.

The CEC hopes it will be able to bully workers into accepting its "final offer." But should this fail, it is counting on the provincial Liberal government to introduce back-to-work legislation and OPSEU to enforce it.

While the government maintains that the CEC is autonomous, it in fact holds the purse strings and ultimately determines the way in which the province's colleges are run.

Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne has repeatedly signaled that she will intervene if a "negotiated" settlement is not soon reached. In response to a question about whether her Liberal government would outlaw the strike, she replied, "You never rule anything out." In 2012, the Liberals, under

Wynne's predecessor Dalton McGuinty, enacted Bill 115 to outlaw all job action by the province's public school teachers and impose wage-cutting contracts on them by government decree.

The Liberals' anti-worker record has been enthusiastically endorsed by the union bureaucracy, which has spent millions of dollars over the past four provincial elections to keep the Liberals in power, on the pretext of keeping out the Progressive Conservatives. The Ontario Working Families Coalition, made up of various unions, has already begun releasing pro-Liberal attack ads for next June's provincial election.

The corporate press has predictably maintained an anti-worker slant throughout the strike. While ignoring the difficult working and living conditions of the precarious teaching staff, it has attempted to pit students against their professors by blaming the strikers for lost classroom time.

This has been aided and abetted by a reactionary campaign waged by several student associations, which have appealed for the government to intervene in the dispute. Fraudulently presenting themselves as "neutral" in the job action, the student unions have deliberately avoided informing students that an intervention by Wynne's Liberal government would be aimed at enforcing all the employers' concession demands.

The difficult conditions that students face – anxiety over missing exams and hiring dates, the stress of working and studying at the same time, and the uncertainty over future employment prospects – are similar to, and bound up with, the problems faced by the predominantly precariously employed faculty.

The patent absurdity of the corporate media's attempt to frame the CEC as reasonable is made clearer when viewed in the context of the immense inequality within the college system and society as a whole.

Liberal, Conservative, and NDP governments alike have starved the community college system of resources. In 1965, when the system was introduced, government funding constituted 80 percent of operating revenues. Today, these funds comprise only 44 percent of operating revenues.

College presidents routinely earn salaries of half a million dollars or more, with five-figure annual raises. Colleges regularly run financial surpluses into the millions of dollars, often with the help of large grants from corporate and well-heeled individual donors.

Within Canadian society, social inequality is skyrocketing. Recent figures show that two of the wealthiest billionaires in the country, David Thomson (Reuters) and Galen Weston Sr. (Loblaws), own as much wealth as the bottom 11 million Canadians combined. Canadian corporations earned profits of \$91.9 billion in just the first quarter of 2017.

And yet, the common refrain from governments at all levels is that there is no money to fund public education and other vital services, and that working people and youth must tighten their belts and make sacrifices. No reductions are asked of the ruling class, who get wealthier year-upon-year even as the working class is driven further into economic insecurity and want.

To their credit, hundreds of students have come out in support of their professors. The Twitter hashtag #standwithfaculty lists hundreds of tweets of students endorsing their professors' struggle. Dozens of students attended a rally last week at Toronto's Queen's Park in solidarity with the strikers.

However, support for the rank-and-file faculty must in no way imply support for OPSEU, which has made clear that it intends to sell out the strike and capitulate to the Liberals' impending strikebreaking legislation. The union bureaucracy, having helped maintain the Liberals in power for years, is utterly incapable and unwilling to prosecute this struggle.

Striking professors, counsellors, and librarians must join with the 500,000 affected students 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.

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 pro-capitalist 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.



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