

Canada: 3,000 contract teachers and graduate assistants strike York University

Roger Jordan
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Three thousand contract faculty and teaching and research assistants at Toronto's York University walked off the job Monday, after decisively voting down management's "final" contract offer late last week.

The main issue in dispute is job security, under conditions where a majority of courses at York are being taught by teachers working on short-term contracts lasting only a few months.

Management has offered pitiful annual wage increases of 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3 percent respectively for each year of a three-year contract. Given the current rate of inflation, these "increases" would at best result in stagnant earnings.

Moreover, the pay offer for contract faculty, teaching assistants, research assistants and graduate assistants would leave them earning low and in many cases poverty-level wages. Many education workers live below the provincial poverty line. A contract faculty member can expect to earn little more than \$25,000, for teaching the same number of courses as a tenured professor earning anywhere from \$80,000 to \$150,000.

One striking faculty member told the *World Socialist Web Site* that full-time contract faculty, who often have to hold down jobs at different institutions to make ends meet, earn little more than a full-time employee at Walmart. It is common for contract faculty to learn only weeks or even days in advance whether they will have a teaching post in the coming semester.

Having slashed between 600 and 800 graduate assistant positions over recent years, the university also included in its offer the derisory pledge to hire eight full-time faculty members in each of the coming three years, with only two per year receiving full tenured status.

Hundreds of the strikers, who have been working

without a contract since August 31, 2017, rallied on the university campus Monday. Slogans chanted at the protest included a call for an end to poverty wages.

Well aware of the militancy among the contract faculty and graduate assistants, who waged a determined month-long strike in 2015 in the face of repeated efforts by the CUPE bureaucracy to shut it down, the CUPE 3903 bargaining team felt compelled to advise its members to vote against management's final offer on Friday. But the union sought to preempt the strike by having a motion passed allowing bargaining to continue over the weekend in the hopes of reaching a deal with the university even before the job action began.

Management refused to return to talks and has instead adopted a provocative stance towards the strike. The York administration has insisted that classes will continue as normal, a move designed to encourage hard-pressed contract faculty to scab on their colleagues, and encourage students, who pay exorbitant tuition fees for their courses, to cross picket lines.

The administration has also offered to send contentious issues, including job security, to binding arbitration. It does so full in the knowledge that arbitration decisions invariably enforce employers' demands.

The administration feels it can act so aggressively because it can count on CUPE to isolate and smother the strike. It is also confident that it will be back-stopped by the provincial Liberal government, which ultimately holds the university's purse-strings, and has repeatedly used back-to-work legislation to enforce its austerity program in the education sector.

The York strike comes just four months after Kathleen Wynne's Liberals, which CUPE and the trade unions more broadly have praised and supported as a

“progressive” alternative to the Tories, criminalized a strike by 12,000 Ontario college instructors. After college faculty displayed tremendous militancy during their month-long struggle for job security and higher wages, the Ontario Public Service Employees Union dropped the issue of job security from its talks with the employer; then rolled over without a fight when the Liberal government tabled a back-to-work law.

The York strike also follows two weeks after a massive vote by close to 10,000 public school teachers in Nova Scotia in favour of illegal strike action against the provincial Liberal government’s plan to launch an all-out assault on the public education system. The teachers’ union refused to fulfil the strike mandate, entering instead into backroom talks with the government. When the government subsequently announced a plan to integrate the union into enforcing its reactionary reforms, the leadership of the Nova Scotia Teachers Union said the Liberals had heeded its concerns and ruled out any job action.

In West Virginia, 30,000 teachers have rebelled against their unions’ attempts to send them back to work and force through a deal that would have met none of their demands for improved wages and an end to exorbitant health care costs.

Under these conditions, with education workers being radicalized across Canada and internationally as part of a global working class upsurge, CUPE is doing all it can to ensure the strike at York remains isolated and does not become the starting point for a broader mobilization. As CUPE 3903 chair Devin Lefebvre told the media, “We’re sorry that this is happening. We had hoped to reach a settlement, but York had other plans.

“CUPE 3903 remains ready, willing and available to resume bargaining on short notice,” added Lefebvre. “The only thing missing from the picture is a willing partner across the bargaining table.”

Striking York University faculty and support staff must take such comments as a serious warning. If the strike remains under CUPE’s control, the union bureaucracy will move to shut it down at the first opportunity without achieving the strikers’ demands. The fight to secure decent wages and secure employment in higher education can only be advanced if workers take control of the strike out of the hands of the union, and appeal for support from students, faculty members, teachers and other workers across Canada

and internationally, all of whom confront the same issues of precarious employment and stagnant or poverty wages and the same ruling-class assault on education and other essential public services.



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