

Ontario Liberal government preparing intervention to end York University strike

Roger Jordan
24 March 2018

As 3,000 contract faculty, graduate assistants and teaching assistants conclude their third week of strike action at Toronto's York University, Ontario's Liberal provincial government is preparing to intervene to end the dispute on the employer's terms.

The big business Liberals, who have enjoyed the unions' steadfast support since coming to power 15 years ago, have repeatedly resorted to back-to-work legislation to criminalize workers' job action and impose concessionary contracts. This includes adopting an emergency anti-strike law against the very same group of York University workers in January 2009, "The York University Labour Disputes Resolution Act."

The striking contract-teachers and research and teaching assistants, represented by Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 3903, are demanding substantial pay increases, as most currently receive poverty wages, and enhanced job security. Contract faculty are frequently employed on a semester-to-semester basis, meaning they have to reapply for their posts every few months.

Immediately after management provocatively walked away from the bargaining table earlier this week, Liberal post-secondary education minister Mitzie Hunter demanded that the strike be brought to a quick conclusion. Underscoring that the government could legislate an end to the strike and impose binding arbitration, Hunter added, "The best deals ... happen at the bargaining table."

In what was clearly a test-run for arguments that the government would use to publicly justify illegalizing the strike, Hunter added, "I know everyone is working very hard. ... everyone knows that the priority is the students and their learning."

Hunter's remarks are further proof that striking faculty and student assistants face a political struggle against the Liberal government—which holds the purse strings of all Ontario's universities, their autonomous status notwithstanding—and their trade union allies. To achieve

their just demands, striking workers must break with the CUPE bureaucracy and fight for the broadest possible mobilization of workers and students in defence of education, all public services, and workers' social and democratic rights.

The possibility for such a mobilization was underscored late Thursday, when more than a hundred students occupied York University's Senate in support of the strike.

A post by the group, "Students for CUPE 3903," on Twitter urged students to join the occupation to "demand that our education + the working conditions of our educators be taken seriously." Another message declared that the occupation would continue until the administration cancels all classes for the duration of the strike. The group declared that it is "in solidarity with all university workers and teachers on strike: CUPE 2424 at Carleton, the University and College Union in the UK, Oklahoma teachers, and all teachers striking throughout the world."

If this initial expression of solidarity by students for the strike is to strengthen the strike and contribute to a broader political mobilization for decent-paying and secure jobs, striking faculty and students must draw political conclusions from the treacherous role being played by CUPE.

Since the strike began, CUPE—whether at the local, regional, or national level—has remained silent on the threat of government intervention and the Wynne Liberal government's role in imposing austerity, casting the struggle in the most narrow collective bargaining terms. Yet only last November, the Ontario government imposed back-to-work legislation on 12,000 college teachers.

Similarly CUPE has chosen to remain silent on Hunter's intervention, although it is manifestly the Liberals' first step in imposing a rotten settlement on the strikers, whether through an "agreement" reached under

the threat of direct government intervention, or by outlawing the strike and empowering an arbitrator to dictate the workers' terms of employment.

The York administration, knowing full well that it can rely on the big business Liberal government to enforce its attacks, has refused point blank to negotiate on the basis of a union proposal to include a handful of extra permanent positions in the new contract.

CUPE's actions are in keeping with the role that unions across Canada have played for more than three decades. Under conditions of an ever-widening ruling-class assault on public services and workers' rights, they have systematically suppressed worker resistance, while supporting pro-austerity and pro-war parties like the Liberals, Parti Quebecois, and NDP.

The federal government has resorted to back-to-work legislation 19 times over the past three decades and provincial governments have used such laws 79 times, according to Canadian Foundation for Labour Rights, yet the unions have organized no opposition. Instead they have used the anti-strike laws and the threat of such legislation to shut down strikes and to impose concession contracts.

Under conditions of mounting working class struggles internationally, including strikes and protests by teachers and university staff in the United States and Britain, CUPE fears that the York strike could rapidly escape its control. In West Virginia, 33,000 teachers and other school employees won significant support from other sections of workers when they rebelled against their unions' efforts to send them back to work with a concessions-filled deal, while UK university lecturers forced the continuation of a strike over pensions, repudiating a concessionary deal endorsed by the University College Union.

CUPE knows full well that anger over decades of austerity and rampant social inequality are fueling like oppositional sentiments among workers across Canada.

At Carleton University in Ottawa, 800 administrative and support staff, who are also represented by CUPE, have been on strike over the university's attempt to undermine their pensions since March 5. Although the York and Carleton strikes have unfolded simultaneously, CUPE has made no attempt to unify the two struggles, let alone called for other workers, including its own hundreds of thousands of members, to come to their support

CUPE's opposition to the mobilizing the working class in defence of the York strike goes hand in hand with its close alliance and that of the entire union bureaucracy

with the Ontario Liberals and the federal Liberal government of Justin Trudeau. Over the course of successive election campaigns, the unions have funneled millions of dollars into Liberal election campaigns, promoting the fatal illusion among workers that the Liberals offer a "progressive" alternative to the Conservatives.

At York, CUPE has presided over the betrayal of past strikes and the cutting of hundreds of student assistant jobs.

In 2015, CUPE worked tirelessly to play one section of workers off against the other in order to sell-out the struggle and undermine militant opposition to its acceptance of concessions. Faced with angry denunciations of its bargaining strategy and the rejection by rank-and-file teachers and support staff of a rotten concessions deal, CUPE proceeded to divide the 3,700 strikers by cutting a separate deal with management just for contract faculty. Teaching assistants and graduate assistants were left to fight on alone for a further three weeks before the union succeeded in shutting down the strike.

On the basis of the labour agreement CUPE rammed through, management moved in 2016 to slash 600 to 800 teaching and graduate assistant positions, more than 20 percent of the workforce.

If the current strike is not to be similarly betrayed, striking faculty and assistants, and their student supporters, must break CUPE's stranglehold over it. Strikers and students should form an independent strike committee to organize a struggle against poverty wages and job insecurity, and for free education for all, outside the organizational and political control of the union bureaucracy. An urgent appeal should be made to university staff across Canada and internationally, who all confront similar problems due to endless austerity and the marketization of higher education, and to other sections of the working class, who have experienced decades of wage cuts and declining living standards as a result of the attacks imposed by provincial and federal governments of all political stripes, including the NDP.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact