

York University conspires with Ontario government to break contract-faculty and assistants' strike

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The strike the 3,000 contract-faculty and graduate teaching and research assistants at Toronto's York University are waging against poverty wages and precarious employment is in grave danger.

While the university administration conspires with the provincial Liberal government to break the four-week-old strike, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) continues to isolate the strike and adamantly opposes making it the spearhead of a broader mobilization of the working class against the Liberals' austerity agenda and in defence of education and workers' rights, including the right to strike.

York has now invoked its prerogative under the province's reactionary labour laws to force strikers to vote on its "final" March 20 contract offer. That offer included derisory pay "increases" of 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3 percent respectively in each year of a three-year contract. When inflation is factored in, these increases would amount to a pay freeze or worse.

The vote will be organized by Ontario's Ministry of Labour and is likely to be held next week.

With unbelievable cynicism, the university administration, which treats contract faculty like high-educated temps and charges students exorbitant tuition fees, is trying to pose as the defender of students' interests. In its statement announcing the forced ratification vote, the university declared, "Our 50,000 undergraduate students want to get back to finish the school year so they can keep their plans—graduation, summer jobs, family responsibilities, and travel for those going home or abroad."

Nobody can take this hypocritical blather seriously, coming as it does from an administration that has substituted ultimatums for bargaining and has repeatedly tabled insulting offers to the highly-exploited contract staff that it relies on to teach fully 60 percent of all York classes. While the university expects over 3,000 highly-qualified instructors and researchers to labour on short-term contracts just to make ends meet, its top executives are richly compensated,

including President and Vice-Chancellor Rhonda Lenton, who raked in the handsome sum of \$369,497 in 2017.

The university can proceed in such a flagrantly offensive manner because it knows that it has the full backing of the provincial Liberal government of Kathleen Wynne.

Not only do the Liberals ultimately control the purse strings of York, as they do all of the province's universities. For the past decade, and especially since 2011, the Liberals have been slashing funding for education, healthcare, and social services, while imposing cuts in real wages and speed-up on the workers who administer these vital services.

Advanced Education Minister Mitzie Hunter has already publicly declared that the strike should come to a quick end and signaled the Liberals are preparing to legalize it and appoint an arbitrator to dictate the contract-faculty and assistants' contracts. In a thinly veiled threat Hunter declared last week, "The best deals ... happen at the bargaining table."

The Liberal government has repeatedly resorted to back-to-work legislation to break worker opposition, especially in the education sector. Last November, it outlawed a strike of 12,000 college instructors.

Significantly, it did so immediately after the striking college teachers had overwhelmingly repudiated the employer's rotten contract proposals in a government-forced "final offer" vote—a vote exactly like the one the Ontario Labour Relations Board is now organizing on behalf of York.

York and the government are clearly following the same script. If the strikers vote down York's miserable offer, as they should, the university administration and their Liberal allies intend to hold up the "final offer" vote as "proof" collective bargaining has "failed" and the government has no choice but to intervene to "save" the students' semester.

For York this would not be the first time that a forced "final" offer vote served as the prelude to an "emergency" strike-breaking law. In 2009, the Liberals used a back-to-

work law to end a dispute involving the very same group of workers at York on management's terms.

In preparation for repeating this scenario nine years later, the university has already announced its support for the current contract dispute being resolved by binding arbitration.

As the threat of Liberal government intervention looms ever larger, CUPE, to say nothing of the Ontario Federation of Labour, is doing all it can to demobilize the strikers and prepare a rotten sellout. It responded to management's latest provocation by meekly pleading for a new round of bargaining.

Beyond token professions of solidarity, CUPE has not lifted a finger to mobilize support for the strike from its more than half-million members, students, and the working class as a whole and it has remained studiously silent about the threat of a government back-to-work law, although York clearly views it as its trump card.

Simultaneously with the York strike, 800 support staff at Ottawa's Carleton University, who are also represented by CUPE, have been on strike to oppose a major attack on their pensions. Yet the union has done nothing to unite these struggles.

The leadership of CUPE 3903 never tires of touting its militancy. But it deliberately undermined the last strike in 2015 by reaching a separate deal for contract faculty which left student assistants to strike alone for three weeks before their struggle was sold out. On the basis of that deal, York management was able to eliminate over 700 jobs.

Moreover, hand-in-hand with the CUPE national and regional office, the CUPE 3903 leadership has worked to confine the current strike within the straitjacket of collective bargaining, denying the obvious fact that the strikers are pitted not just against the York administration, but against the Liberal government, and its austerity agenda and anti-worker laws.

CUPE's principal fear is that the strike could become the catalyst for a much broader mobilization of the working class. It wants to avoid this at all costs, since it, together with the union bureaucracy as a whole, is gearing up for a campaign to mobilize support for the big-business Liberals in the upcoming Ontario provincial election in the name of "stopping" the right-wing populist Doug Ford. This follows on from more than a decade in which the unions have boosted the federal Liberals (under Paul Martin, Stephane Dion, Michael Ignatieff, and now Justin Trudeau) and the Wynne-McGuinty Liberals in Ontario as a "progressive" alternative to the Conservatives, while smothering working-class opposition to wage and job cuts and the dismantling of public services.

Striking faculty and student assistants will win nothing if

their struggle continues under the leadership of CUPE. They should immediately form a strike committee to take control of their struggle out of the union's hands. This committee should make a direct appeal to staff and students at York and Carleton to join their struggle and call on workers across Ontario and Canada to join a counter-offensive to overturn decades of concessions and secure free education at all levels as a social right.

Such a struggle is above all political, and can only be waged independently of and in opposition to the trade unions, which cannot be reformed by means of "pressure" from below. In recent weeks, teachers in West Virginia and lecturers in Britain rebelled against their unions to continue strikes after the bureaucracy sought to scuttle job actions and impose the employers' terms. This is part of an international upsurge of the class struggle that has already this year included strikes and protests by metal workers in Germany, public sector employees in France, teachers in Holland and Slovenia, and workers in Iran and Tunisia.

The York strikers and all workers should orient to this international radicalization of the working class and make contact with their class brothers and sisters around the world to wage a joint struggle for an end to poverty wages and precarious employment, a vast expansion of public services, and social equality. This requires above all the development of the working class as an independent political force fighting to impart its own socialist solution to a crisis-ridden and increasingly violent and militaristic global capitalist system.



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