

# Ontario government passes draconian law to end five-month York University strike

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Ontario's new right-wing Conservative government passed legislation (Bill 2) Wednesday that illegalized a five-month strike by 2,000 graduate teaching and research assistants at York University in Toronto.

The legislation mandates that the union representing the strikers, the Canadian Union for Public Employees (CUPE) Local 3903, and York University enter into binding arbitration. It includes a draconian clause forbidding arbitrators from prohibiting the university from taking reprisals (i.e., firing and other disciplinary action) against the strikers.

The conflict broke out on March 3, when more than 3,000 contract faculty, teaching assistants and research assistants, who are responsible for 60 percent of the teaching at the university, struck against low pay and precarious work.

The virulently right-wing government of Doug Ford has defended the new law by posturing as a defender of students' interests. This preposterous claim is belied by the fact that the Ford government is planning to enact sweeping social spending cuts, including \$100 million to desperately needed public school repairs. Already in its first month since taking power the government has announced a full review of all public spending, laying the groundwork to go far beyond even Ford's election campaign pledge to reduce spending by \$6 billion per year.

The union, which in late June offered to voluntarily submit "major outstanding issues" to arbitration, immediately complied with the legislation and has announced it is considering a court challenge as to its constitutionality. The union bureaucracy has repeatedly urged workers to place their faith in the bourgeois courts to uphold their rights, even though the courts are a key instrument for enforcing the interests of big business and will take years to rule on the latest

dispute.

The York strike was the longest at an English-language university in Canadian history and the third such strike at York University since 2009. As in the case of the previous two strikes, the unions acted to isolate the struggle and provide the provincial government the time needed to enact legislation for its criminalization.

Even though it was clear from the outset that the provincial government would intervene on the side of the employer to enforce attacks on the strikers, CUPE refused to warn of this prospect, let alone call for a political struggle against it. This is because CUPE and the union bureaucracy as a whole were deeply hostile to the expansion of the strike into a counteroffensive against the growth of precarious work, poverty wages and attacks on education and social spending.

The York strike took place amid massive cuts to post-secondary spending by the provincial Liberal government. Less than six months earlier, in November 2017, the Liberals outlawed a strike by 12,000 college instructors.

The strike also underscored the vast gulf separating high-level university administrators such as the York University president and vice chancellor, Rhonda Lenton, who took home \$369,497 in 2017, and students and university staff, who face steep hikes in tuition and crippling debt on the one hand and precarious employment and poverty wages on the other.

Coinciding with the strike's outbreak in March, 800 support staff at Carleton University in Ottawa, also represented by CUPE, struck to oppose major assaults on their pensions, yet the union did nothing to unify the two struggles. Nor did it make any appeal to students to mount a joint struggle to make free post-secondary education for all a social right.

In June, as in the 2015 strike at York, after which the university eliminated 700 jobs, CUPE connived with management to agree to a separate contract for the 1,100 York contract faculty, dividing the strikers and isolating the teaching and graduate assistants.

In response to the tabling of the legislation last week, CUPE National President Mark Hancock attempted to cover for the union's complicity with grandiose bluster entirely at odds with the union's complete inaction to prevent the defeat of the strike. He stated, "An attack on any CUPE members in Ontario is an attack on all 650,000 CUPE members nationwide."

The trade unions as a whole have maintained a close political alliance with the Liberal Party over the past twenty years, even as federal and provincial Liberal governments have engaged in a vicious onslaught on the working class including drastic austerity measures and attacks on democratic rights. More recently, and especially since last month's electoral debacle for the Liberals, the unions have oriented towards the social-democratic New Democratic Party, which carried out far-reaching attacks on public and social services in the early 1990s under Bob Rae and provided parliamentary support for a minority Ontario Liberal government between 2011 and 2014 that imposed austerity and illegalized teacher job action.

The unions' shift behind the NDP is bound up with concern within the union bureaucracy that the brewing popular opposition to Ford's far-right program could escape their control.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted back in March, "CUPE's principal fear is that the [York] strike could become the catalyst for a much broader mobilization of the working class."



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