

# Ontario Conservatives ban impending power workers' strike

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Ontario's Doug Ford-led Conservative government recalled the provincial legislature from its Christmas recess this week to pass a bill, the Protecting Ontario's Power Supply act, that outlaws a threatened strike by 6,000 Ontario Power Generation (OPG) workers.

The Conservatives announced the legislature's recall late last week, shortly after the OPG workers rejected the utility's "final" contract offer. The twice-rejected deal would further institutionalize two-tier pensions and benefits by continuing to deny equal benefits to more than 300 workers hired on a fixed-term basis.

In a virtually unprecedented move, the government is adopting anti-strike legislation before any job action has occurred. The bill outlawing the strike action and imposing binding arbitration is expected to be passed by Ford's majority government today.

This marks the second time in its six months in office that Ford's right-wing government has recalled the legislature to adopt an anti-strike law.

In the current dispute, members of the provincial Power Workers Union (PWU) rejected a contract offer last August that was recommended by the union leadership. Last week, OPG workers rejected by a 60 percent majority virtually the same offer when the union again presented it to them. A 21-day strike notification was then issued by the union in order to prepare for an orderly shutdown of nuclear power stations.

The PWU represents workers at OPG's string of nuclear installations, as well as natural gas plants, wind and thermal facilities and hydroelectric dams. The provincial government-owned OPG produces about half of the province's electricity.

Since Ford took office, his Progressive Conservatives have adopted a battery of right-wing measures. These include: retracting a minimum wage increase and newly-enacted provisions providing pay guarantees for on-call workers and increased paid-leave; welfare cuts; a

provincial hiring freeze; cuts to education funding; and legislation outlawing a strike by graduate teaching and research assistants at York University.

Anticipating mounting popular opposition, Ford has sought to cultivate an ultra-right constituency, by pandering to the police and the religious right and by scapegoating refugees for the social crisis produced by decades of cuts to social housing by all three major parties.

The Ontario premier's banning of strikes and embrace of anti-democratic methods of rule is part of an international process rooted in the deepening global capitalist crisis. From the Trump administration in the US to Emmanuel Macron's government, which has used state violence in an unsuccessful bid to crush France's "yellow vest" protests, and the German government's embrace of the anti-immigrant chauvinism of the Alternative for Germany—ruling elites the world over are running roughshod over traditional democratic norms to enforce the interests of the corporate elite and super-rich in the face of mounting working-class opposition.

Ford's anti-strike bill comes in the wake of the federal Liberal government's outlawing of a bitter five-week rotating strike against Canada Post. Postal workers were also legislated back to work in 2011 by the previous Conservative government of Stephen Harper. Harper's Conservatives routinely adopted or threatened strike-breaking legislation against railway, airline and other workers. Although the Conservatives' 2011 legislation targeting postal workers was eventually ruled to be in violation of the Canadian constitution's Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the court imposed no penalties, let alone reversed the pension cuts, expansion of two-tier wages and other concessions the government bludgeoned from postal workers.

Ford's Energy Minister Greg Rickford displayed his government's utter contempt for workers' rights, with his

quip that the power workers' dispute was "less about rights and more about lights." As for Ford, he has mused that his government may designate OPG an "essential service," thereby stripping the power workers of the right to strike in perpetuity. "We haven't crossed that bridge yet," said Ford, then added, "Would we rule it out? We wouldn't rule anything out."

Nonetheless, the Conservatives have taken the measure of the Power Workers union bureaucracy. Their legislation is aimed at parrying discontent amongst rank-and-file power workers (and workers in general), not the union that has already recommended OPG's contract offer (and been rebuked by the membership for doing so).

"We appreciate the Power Workers' Union," said Minister Rickford. "They issued their vote to strike and strike notice on Friday and they remain on the job. We appreciate that, because we think they understand the importance of no interruptions during this critical season of peak demand and temperatures getting colder."

True to form, the Power Workers Union (PWU) immediately signaled that it will enforce the no-strike law. In a press release, the PWU expressed its "disappointment," while citing PWU President Mel Hyatt's boast that the union has a "proven track record" of negotiating "responsible" agreements. The PWU's "priority," added Hyatt, "has always been the strength and health of Ontario's electricity sector."

The union has a long history of collaboration with big business Ontario governments from its opposition to the Days of Action strikes against the Mike Harris Conservative government in 1996–97 to its active support for the Liberals' privatization of Hydro One. Indeed, one of the union's past presidents, John Murphy, jumped directly from union head to OPG executive management in 2001.

In the last contract with OPG in 2015, the union negotiated pension givebacks in return for workers receiving a few shares of Hydro One stock each year for the next 12 years. The PWU's support for privatization is not some "one-off" aberration, as many apologists for the pro-capitalist unions have argued. In 2015, it was revealed that in the run-up to the June 2014 provincial election, bureaucrats in the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) sought to get their snout in the trough of a potential privatization of the Liquor Control Board of Ontario, offering themselves as potential new owners of the operation.

As for the Ontario Federation of Labour, it has made it clear, ever since Ford came to power, that it is adamantly

opposed to any working class mobilization against his class-war government. This is exemplified by a countdown clock on the masthead of its website that shows the time remaining until the next provincial election in 2022 and the possibility of replacing the Conservatives with a "progressive" government, i.e., some governmental combination of the NDP and the Liberals that will be as beholden to the demands of the corporate elite as Ford. OPSEU union head Smokey Thomas put things more bluntly, instructing his restive membership to just "cool it."

Both the New Democratic Party (NDP), Ontario's current official opposition, and the former governing Liberals have stated that they will vote against Ford's anti-strike legislation. This is rich. When holding the reins of power, both parties have launched vicious attacks on workers' rights to strike and bargain collectively in Ontario and every other province.

Power workers should be under no illusions. Hyatt and the PWU bureaucracy's refusal to mobilize against Ford's diktats conform to a decades-long pattern. The unions systematically demobilize workers and prevent them from preparing for a clash with the political representatives of big business; then when the state intervenes, they insist that the workers are isolated and have no choice but to bow before any government anti-strike order. Rank-and-file action committees must be established at every power installation independent of the union apparatus. They should reach out to workers across Canada to organize a counteroffensive against austerity, concessions, the criminalization of workers' struggle and all the attacks of the big business Ford and Trudeau Liberal governments.



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