

Ontario workers need an international socialist program to defend public education and fight austerity

The Socialist Equality Party (Canada)
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The following statement was distributed Saturday by the SEP-Canada at a Toronto demonstration of thousands of Ontario educators protesting cuts to public education.

Teachers, students, and other workers will protest in their thousands today against the vicious austerity measures that Doug Ford's right-wing populist government is imposing on Ontario's public education system. The Progressive Conservatives are cutting thousands of teaching positions, increasing class sizes, decimating support services for children with additional needs, gutting financial support for university and college students (OSAP), slashing funds for much-needed school repairs, and making regressive changes to the school curriculum.

The outrage felt towards this attack, which was also expressed on Thursday when thousands of students walked out at over 700 schools across the province, is entirely justified and welcome. But workers and young people must face some hard truths if their struggle is to be successful.

First, the Liberals, New Democratic Party, and trade unions have themselves been complicit in the imposition of decades of austerity and the evisceration of worker rights. Second, workers and young people are engaged not merely in a fight against the Trump wannabe Doug Ford or Ontario's Progressive Conservative government. In fighting to defend public education, they are challenging the austerity agenda and predatory interests of the entire Canadian ruling elite.

It follows from this that a new strategy is required—a strategy based on the mobilization of the independent class strength of the working class in Ontario, across Canada, and internationally for the socialist reorganization of socioeconomic life.

The unions who have called today's protest, the Ontario

Secondary School Teachers' Federation, the other Ontario teacher unions, and the Canadian Union of Public Employees, are bitterly hostile to mobilizing the working class in a political struggle against the destruction of education, and the Ford government. They all have long records of collaborating intimately with the former Ontario Liberal government to suppress strikes by workers, including teachers, ram through austerity budgets, and gut workplace benefits.

From the unions' standpoint, today's protest is a cynical manoeuvre aimed at associating themselves with the growing anger and opposition to Ford, so they can divert it into futile appeals to the government, and bring it under the wing of the pro-austerity Liberals and NDP.

No one should be fooled by this stunt. Since Doug Ford came to power with the full support of big business last June, he has slashed welfare and overtime pay, rolled back a modest minimum wage increase, laid the groundwork for cutting billions from education and healthcare, criminalized a strike by university teachers' assistants and an impending strike by power workers, and threatened to outlaw teacher job action against his "education reform." The unions, led by the Ontario Federation of Labour, have not lifted a finger to oppose these draconian attacks.

Instead, the OFL website counsels patience and, in doing so, makes clear that the unions are adamantly opposed to mobilizing the working class to bring down the Ford government. Visitors to the OFL website are greeted by a countdown clock informing them that if workers just wait a little over three years, they will get the chance to elect a "progressive" government at the next provincial election in 2022, i.e. another right-wing, capitalist government led by either the NDP or Liberals.

The unions' determination to prevent a working-class

challenge to the class war assault of big business and its political hirelings has a long pedigree in Ontario. During the 1990s, when hundreds of thousands of workers were mobilized against the hard-right Common Sense Revolution of the last provincial Tory government, the unions shut the movement down, so as to prevent it escaping their control and threatening the “legitimacy”—i.e. continued existence—of Mike Harris’s government.

The intervening years saw the teachers’ unions, Unifor, and others openly align themselves with the big-business Liberal governments of Dalton McGuinty and Kathleen Wynne, which savaged public spending, imposed pay cuts on teachers, healthcare workers, and other public servants, and handed over billions to the corporate elite through tax cuts and subsidies.

At the federal level, the unions have been equally complicit in enforcing pro-austerity, pro-war policies. In 2015, they shamelessly promoted Justin Trudeau and the Liberals as a “progressive” alternative to Stephen Harper, with their “Anybody but Conservative” campaign. Unifor and the Canadian Labour Congress have developed the most intimate ties with a federal government in decades, even as the Liberals have expanded Canadian imperialism’s involvement in US military strategic offensives around the world, including against Russia, China and Venezuela, set a course to hike military spending by more than 70 percent by 2026, cooperated with the Trump administration in its anti-immigrant witch-hunt, given the national-security apparatus new surveillance powers, and bludgeoned workers with back-to-work laws or the threat of them, including criminalizing last year’s postal strike.

The anti-worker policies pursued by Ford and Trudeau are being replicated by their bourgeois counterparts in every country. In the United States, Trump openly appeals to fascistic forces, and right-wing extremist parties are on the rise throughout Europe. In France, President Emmanuel Macron has deployed the army with orders authorizing them to fire on Yellow Vest protesters, whose anger has been fuelled by the vast growth of social inequality.

In response, the working class is emerging as a global force of struggle. In Matamoros, Mexico, 70,000 workers rebelled against the pro-employer trade unions in a massive strike earlier this year, and appealed for support from workers in the US and internationally. In Europe, in addition to the Yellow Vests, there have been mass strikes by teachers, educators, and other sections of workers in

Germany, Belgium, Eastern Europe, and Portugal. A central feature of all of these struggles, as well as the revolutionary mobilization in Algeria, is that they are developing in opposition—and increasingly in an explicit rebellion against—the pro-capitalist trade union apparatuses and their allies in the establishment “left” parties.

The unions virulently oppose the development of a globally unified working-class movement, and instead systematically work to divide workers, including by spewing out filthy chauvinist propaganda. Since GM announced the closure of its Oshawa auto plant last November, Unifor has sought to divide autoworkers along national lines. While opposing any job action against GM, Unifor in the name of defending “Canadian” jobs has mounted a racist boycott campaign targeting Mexican workers. This included dressing someone up in stereotypical Mexican clothing at a Canadian flag-waving rally in Windsor.

Teachers, workers, and young people must advance their own initiatives, based on the understanding that their struggle must consciously orientate to joining forces with the growing international working-class offensive.

If public education from kindergarten to university is to be defended, workers and students must launch a political struggle independently of the unions and in opposition to the entire political establishment, including the Liberals and NDP. They must organize their own committees of struggle in schools, universities, factories, other workplaces, and residential neighbourhoods to coordinate protests and strikes, and begin preparations for a political general strike to bring down the Ford Conservative and Trudeau Liberal governments. Above all, they must adopt a socialist-internationalist perspective to realize the demands of working people for quality education, decent well-paying jobs and other social rights—the fight for a workers’ government committed to placing the central economic levers of society under the democratic control of working people so they can be used to meet social needs, not serve personal enrichment.



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