

“We are the future. Give us what we need!”

Thousands of Ontario students walk out to protest school cuts

Our reporters
6 April 2019

Thousands of students across Ontario walked out of their classes at 1:15 p.m. Thursday to protest the cuts to public education budgets being imposed by the province’s right-wing Progressive Conservative government.

The initiative was organized independently by students themselves, using the #StudentsSayNo hashtag on social media. In the little more than a week since high school student Natalie Moore called for the protest, students from more than 700 schools from all parts of the province signed up to take part.

Ford contemptuously dismissed the protests as a “stunt” by the “teacher union bosses.” In reality, these unions, which have a decades-long record of suppressing strikes, agreeing to wage freezes and acquiescing to budget cuts, had nothing to do with the protests.

The rallies demonstrated the widespread opposition in the working class to Ford’s reactionary agenda, including the rollback of a modest minimum wage increase, billions in spending cuts to health care and other social services, the gutting of financial support for university and college students, and tax handouts to the super rich and big business. They attracted the support of parents and public sector workers.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to participants at Bishop Marrocco/Thomas Merton (BM/TM) Catholic Secondary School in Toronto.

Asked why she was participating in the walkout, Kathleen said, “Our sign says: ‘I should be studying, instead I’m here protesting this sh*t.’ We’re here because we don’t want mandatory e-learning, we don’t want bigger class sizes, we don’t want any of the budget cuts, we don’t want the money that’s supposed

to go towards our education to go towards horses [funding for horse tracks and gambling casinos]. This is not supposed to happen, this is supposed to make our education better and make this province better. So we’re protesting because we don’t want this stuff to happen, period.”

Alyssa added, “We want real teachers. We all learn at different paces. This isn’t supposed to be, ‘Oh, everyone learns the same [way].’ It used to be like that and it wasn’t good. It didn’t work. We want it to work for us.”

Referring to the impact on her personally, Alyssa added, “I wanted to become a teacher. Now, I’m not sure that will be possible.”

Gillian commented, “There are already a lot of kids all getting supervision from one teacher, if you make it [class sizes] bigger, how is any student going to learn?”

Emily said: “We’re protesting the new changes, we should not be having them. ... More hours of online school, kids don’t know how to learn from online school. They need to ask, they need to be there in person, they don’t get those kinds of things. And he [Ford] wants to make a longer [school] day until 5 p.m., with more courses. It doesn’t benefit anyone, you don’t learn just because there are more courses. You need to learn within a certain time, you can’t just push it all on students at once.”

Other students explained how the school’s special high skilled majors (SHSM) program was at risk due to Ford’s cuts. “It’s for special high skilled majors in the arts and culture, automotive, construction and business. And they teach us about what we can do in the future and how we get into those trades,” explained one student.

Asked if the program could continue after the cuts, the students answered, “Not one bit.”

Kasandra commented, “This is an arts school. If you cut the arts program it’s not going to be an arts school anymore. What is the point in that? What is BM/TM, we’ll still have our students, but what are we going to have?”

A mother attended the rally with her 11-month-old and 5-year-old children. “It’s pretty horrifying seeing the things that Doug Ford is doing to this province in general, and especially to the students. He seems to be targeting the students, and I mean I’ve got a five-year-old, I’ve got an 11-month-old, and I’m pretty scared about their future and also just the future for everybody,” she told us.

David, who works in the neighborhood, attended the rally to show his support. “I’m a public sector worker and I am afraid my job is going to get cut,” he said. “For me, it’s a matter of trying to stop the cuts, tax the rich, tax the corporations, raise the minimum wage.”

Protesters noted the widespread support enjoyed by the students and the impact the walkout was having. “People can see us everywhere, they’re watching,” said Gillian. Kasandra added, “It’s not just students, it’s parents, families, teachers, everyone knows.” Asked who their allies were, a group of students spontaneously responded, “Teachers.”

Motorists passing by the rally honked their horns in support. “It’s great because it makes sure that we know we’re not the only ones who are upset about this,” said Kathleen. “It shows that other people that aren’t students or teachers are seeing the changes that are happening in our society and really want to make a change for it too.”

There was a broad understanding among the students that they were up against an all-out assault by the ruling elite. All students declared their readiness to continue the struggle and participate in future protests.

Kathleen explained how she followed the criminalization of the strike by 3,000 teaching assistants at York University by the Ford government last year. Gillian added on the same topic, “That just shows that they’re scared to have us say what we want, to say what is right. We are going to say what is right whether it looks good or bad on you. It needs to be said.”

Students also explained that the initiative for the

walkout came from them. “Some of us saw it on the internet, social media, Instagram, and then we started sharing it on our stories and it just spread like wildfire,” explained Kathleen, referring to the #StudentsSayNo hashtag.

Our reporter asked Kathleen what she thought of the remarks of Education Minister Lisa Thompson, who cynically said that the larger class sizes and budget cuts would improve student “resiliency” for post-secondary education and the employment market. Kathleen answered, “That made me so angry, because her kids went to private school or were home schooled, they didn’t have to experience public schools.”

Juliette took up the issue of the contempt shown by the political establishment towards young people protesting. “We are young but we are here to show that we are more than capable of teaching and expressing ourselves,” she said.

Kasandra added, “This hurts us. Cuts hurt kids. Cuts hurt teachers. We’re risking teachers’ careers and everything and students’ education for what? We are the future. Give us what we need!”



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