Over 10,000 rally in Toronto against Tories' education cuts

Our reporters
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More than 10,000 teachers, students, parents, and their supporters rallied outside the Ontario legislature in Toronto last Saturday to protest attacks on public education by the right-wing Progressive Conservative government. Coming just two days after well over 100,000 high school students walked out at schools across the province, the large turnout underscored the mounting militancy developing within the working class in opposition to the ruling elite's austerity measures.

Demonstrators expressed their anger at plans to cut thousands of teaching positions, increase class sizes, slash funding for children with autism and other social needs, and gut aid for college and university students (OSAP). As well as attendees from Toronto, protesters from many other parts of the province, including as far away as Ottawa, Sudbury, and Windsor, arrived in buses to attend the demonstration.

Participants were eager to express their determination to wage a counteroffensive against the Ford government's attacks. Their determination to wage a struggle in defence of public services and decent-paying jobs is in line with the reemergence of the working class internationally as a mighty social force, including through the mass strike in Matamoros, Mexico, strikes by teachers across the US in defence of public education, the revolutionary upsurge in Algeria, and France's Yellow Vest protests.

In stark contrast to the mood of the protesters, the five unions representing teachers and school board support staff that called Saturday's "Rally for Education" were in full damage control, seeking to maintain the protest within narrowly circumscribed limits. If the unions called Saturday's protest it was with the aim of placing themselves in front of the growing groundswell of popular opposition to the government's "education reform," so as to prevent it escaping their suffocating grip.

Over the past three months, the union bureaucrats have looked on with increasing concern as demonstrations by college and university students, parents of children with special needs, and Thursday's walkout by students were organized largely independently of their control.

As the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) explained in a statement distributed at Saturday's rally, "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."

The accuracy of this assessment was borne out by the speeches the union leaders made at the rally. Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario head Sam Hammond demagogically invoked Thursday's student walkout, which was organized entirely independently of the unions, to justify the bureaucracy's rotten alliance with the pro-austerity and pro-war Liberals and NDP. "Don't forget, Doug Ford, those students are going to be voting in the next provincial election," proclaimed Hammond. "And we're voting with them."

While Hammond no doubt deemed it politic to avoid specifying precisely who he and his fellow union bureaucrats intend to vote for in over three years' time, the Ontario Federation of Labour has made no secret of the fact that it is pushing for a "progressive" government, i.e. a pro-corporate government committed to enforcing attacks on the working class led by either the Liberals or NDP. On its website, the OFL deliberately seeks to discourage workers from waging a struggle against austerity, offering them instead a countdown clock telling them that their next opportunity to elect a "progressive government" will be due in a little over three years and two months' time.

The union bureaucrats also sought to keep the protest at the lowest political level, so as to avoid any challenge to their own right-wing, anti-worker record. No mention was made in the union leaders' speeches of the devastation wrought on the education system by over 15 years of Liberal Party rule, during which time the unions collaborated in the enforcement of budget cuts, attacks to teachers' pension rights, and pay freezes. Instead, all of the focus was on demonizing Ford, the

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millionaire businessman and Trump wannabe whom big business has brought forward to spearhead an intensified assault on the working class.

For his part, Ontario Public Service Employees Union president Smokey Thomas released a hollow and hypocritical statement to coincide with the rally that called on Ontarians to "fight fear with fearlessness" and "unite for a fair Ontario." This is the same Thomas who in August last year ordered OPSEU members not to protest or strike, because "we are already engaged in dialogue with the new government, and I've had a number of meetings with a host of new cabinet ministers."

If Thomas now advocates "unity," it is the unity of the union bureaucracy with the big business Liberals and NDP to ensure that burgeoning working-class opposition to the Ford government's attacks is diverted into futile appeals to the Tories to "see reason" and change course.

In contrast to the cynical political posturing of Hammond and Thomas, teachers and other workers who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* expressed their determination to mount a struggle to defend public education.

"I'm against the cuts," said Rich from Hamilton. "I am a French as a second-language teacher and some of the first programming that's going to be gone as a result of the increasing class sizes is elective programming, including senior languages like French, German, and Spanish." He also addressed the ruling elite's motivation in slashing public education. "I think Ford sees the value of an assembly line manufacturing-based economy and to hell with being educated, because the more educated the students become the more enlightened they become about the agenda that he and his government is following."

Ellen, another teacher with a family of her own, explained, "I'm worried about my students and I'm worried about what a classroom is going to look like with 30, 35 kids, especially kids with special needs without adequate support. And I'm worried about my kids, I have a three-year-old and an 8-month-old and they're going to be starting school soon."

Cassie, a teacher for six years, passionately defended the right of students to a decent public education system, telling our reporter, "We want to have programs that let students find their talents and succeed, but they're cutting programs that might be a kid's only chance or best chance at having a career."

Tasha criticized Ford's comments about Thursday's student walkout, which he contemptuously dismissed as a "stunt" organized by the teachers' unions. She said, "He was insinuating that teachers were forcing kids to walk out, but when you hear them speak, these kids know what they're talking about."

To save even more money, the Ford government is imposing mandatory online learning modules for students, which will not be supervised by teachers. Beth, a French teacher, warned of the negative consequences this would have: "These students aren't going to pass. Those courses are a lot harder than people let on. A lot of students struggle with e-learning. I am a French teacher and we have students do e-learning courses because we can't offer every course all the time in a small francophone high school and it's hard, harder than a regular course because there is no filtration, there's no teacher that is giving guidance."

The critical task now facing teachers, young people, and other workers is to translate the militant opposition to the ruling elite's austerity agenda into an independent political movement of the working class fighting to defend public education, all public services and worker rights and for the socialist reorganization of society. As the SEP stressed in its statement to Saturday's demonstration, "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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