

Ontario Tory government intensifies assault on workers' rights

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Ontario's right-wing populist Premier Doug Ford and his Progressive Conservative government are intensifying their assault on worker rights.

During a recent visit to Markham, Ford all but announced his self-styled "Government for the People" will criminalize teacher job action to force through major hikes in class sizes, teacher job cuts and other concessions that will increase teacher workloads and further undermine public education.

As tens of thousands of teachers across the province enter contract negotiations that are due to climax in the fall, Ford declared, "Guys, don't pull this strike nonsense on the parents and the poor students." The multi-millionaire corporate owner went on to depict the province's teachers—who more and more have to confront in their classrooms the social problems produced by decades of austerity, rapacious social inequality and mounting economic insecurity—as veritable "fat cats."

"I think it's a pretty good deal that they have right now," said Ford. "They get their three months holidays. They have the best benefit package in the entire country, the best pension in the entire country, the health plan. They have a great gig, if you want to call it (that)."

Coming from the mouth of a premier whose government has already announced increases in class sizes that will cost upwards of 10,000 teacher positions, and a miserly 1.2 percent annual "increase" to the education budget—in real terms, a spending cut—there can be no question as to the meaning of Ford's remarks. He and his government intend to outlaw any teacher job action that challenges their assault on public education, while demagogically accusing teachers of holding children and parents "hostage."

In office only since last June, the Ford government has already twice outlawed strikes. Last summer it illegalized a strike by more than two thousand York University teaching and graduate assistants, and in December it

illegalized a threatened strike by 6,000 Ontario Power Generation workers.

Emboldened by the acquiescence and complicity of the trade unions, Ford and his government are mounting a vicious class-war assault, slashing funding for vital public and social services and gutting worker rights.

On April 3, the week before the Conservative government tabled an austerity budget, its Restoring Ontario's Competitiveness Act (Bill 66) was proclaimed law. In the name of reducing red tape, this legislation rolls back labour standards and environmental regulations.

Particularly significant are changes to the rules governing overtime. These changes will both enable employers to lower workers' wages, by avoiding having to pay overtime, and facilitate their compelling workers to work more than 48 hours a week.

Under the previous legislation, employers could not force workers to work more than 48 hours in a week unless the Ministry of Labour's Director of Employment Standards had approved an employer-worker agreement allowing a longer workweek. Henceforth, such agreements will not require Ministry approval, making it far easier for companies to bully workers into working more than 48 hours.

The Restoring Ontario's Competitiveness Act also changes the rules governing "overtime averaging," so as to make it far easier for employers to escape having to pay workers overtime when they work more than 44 hours in a given week.

A previous report commissioned by the Ontario Ministry of Labour had recommended "overtime averaging" be scrapped, as there was "no reason to undermine the requirement to pay overtime by permitting averaging."

Instead, the government has extended overtime averaging from a two-week to a four-week period. This will enable employers to impose longer hours and erratic

work schedules that will help them maximize profits, including by minimizing their overtime payments.

Bill 66 also amends the Labour Relations Act to remove the stipulation that municipalities and publicly-funded bodies like hospitals and universities must employ unionized construction companies on infrastructure projects. While the building trades unions have long connived in the enforcement of brutal attacks on construction workers, this change is aimed at opening the door to an intensified assault on workers' wages and working conditions, including their occupational health and safety.

The new legislation makes many other regressive regulatory changes, including regarding the protection of drinking water, companies' use of toxic substances, the mandatory-posting of labour standards at worksites, and teacher-infant ratios in daycares.

This attack on workers' rights follows hot on the heels of the Ford government's rescinding, under its Making Ontario Open for Business Act, an increase in the minimum wage from \$14 to \$15 that had been slated for January. The increase, proposed by the former Liberal government in a desperate attempt to rally support ahead of last June's provincial election, was replaced by the Low-income Individuals and Families Tax Credit (LIFT), which the Tories claimed would give just as much money to low-income workers.

A study by the Ontario government's own independent fiscal watchdog, the Financial Accountability Office (FAO), has put the lie to these claims. "The LIFT credit will provide fewer benefits to minimum wage workers than increasing the minimum wage from \$14 per hour to \$15," said Peter Weltman, co-author of the report. The study notes that about 800,000 of Ontario's minimum-wage workers will get nothing from the LIFT credit because their earnings are so low that they don't pay any provincial income tax.

The Ford government is spearheading the Canadian ruling class' drive to boost profits and attract investment through increased exploitation of the working class—austerity, privatization, deregulation and the gutting of labor and environmental protections. By last November, Ford was already boasting that his government had "saved" taxpayers \$3.2 billion in program expenses, while reducing taxes for big business and the rich.

Terrified that any mass mobilization against the Ford government could quickly escape their control, the unions have met one government provocation and outrage after

another with a flurry of press releases.

After a decade-and-a-half during which they supported a pro-austerity, big business Liberal government at Queen's Park, the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL), Unifor and the other unions are determined to smother any working class challenge to the Ford government and the Canadian ruling class' austerity and "competitiveness" agenda. Instead, the OFL is urging workers to wait until 2022 to elect a "progressive" government, i.e., a right-wing, pro-capitalist government led either by the New Democratic Party or Liberals.

The Conservatives' wave of social attacks is, nonetheless, being met with growing anger and opposition from Ontario's working class, as evidenced by the rise in protests and strikes throughout the province in the recent weeks. On April 6, more than 10,000 teachers, students, parents and their supporters rallied outside the Ontario legislature, just two days after well over 100,000 high school students had walked out at schools across the province.

Ford has made explicit his government's preparations to answer this militant groundswell from below.

Speaking to the corporate elite at the Ontario Economic Summit in Niagara-on-the-Lake in October he warned that, "not everybody out there supports making Ontario open for business ... these forces are already organizing." As underlined by his implicit threat to outlaw a teachers' strike, Ford and the ruling class are preparing to use state repression and violence to impose their socially incendiary and anti-democratic policies.

If the working class is to develop a sustained counter-offensive against the Ford government—and it must—it needs to be armed with a socialist perspective and program, and to organize itself independently of and in opposition to the pro-capitalist trade unions. Only the struggle for working class political power in Ontario, across Canada and internationally can lead to the radical reorganization of socio-economic life according to human need, not private profit.



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