

Ontario teachers face threat of state repression, wage and job cuts in upcoming contract fight

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As the August 31st contract expiry date for teachers at Ontario's publicly funded elementary and high schools approaches, the province's Progressive Conservative government continues to threaten to use state repression to enforce its sweeping concession demands.

Led by the Trump wannabe Premier Doug Ford, Ontario's government is seeking to impose dramatic class-size increases that would eliminate 10,000 teacher jobs, a cut in real wages, regressive changes to the sick-day regime, and other benefit rollbacks.

The Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF) and the Ontario Public School Board's Association reached an impasse in negotiations earlier this summer. The OSSTF leadership has accepted without protest the referral of the issues in dispute to the Ontario Labour Relations Board, a pro-employer body that invariably reaches conclusions hostile to workers' interests. In 2015, the OLRB outlawed strikes by high school teachers in three school districts at the behest of then the Liberal government of Kathleen Wynne, allowing it to enforce a pay freeze for teachers under its "net zero" public spending framework.

The 78,000 grade school teachers represented by the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO) are still in the preliminary stages of contract talks. Negotiations with the 45,000-member Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association (OECTA) are ongoing. All three contracts expire at the end of August.

Last week, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Education Council representing 55,000 ancillary workers (librarians, early child educators, administrators, custodians, etc.) voted to support "job action" should a deal not be reached with the Ontario government later this autumn. The CUPE contracts also expire at the end of this month. Strike votes are slated amongst the entire membership in the third week of September.

The role of the teacher unions has been to hand the initiative to the Ford government, allowing the Tories to unveil a sweeping assault on teachers' wages and working conditions without their organizing any meaningful resistance. Both the

OSSTF and CUPE ceded to the government's phony offer of early-round bargaining, hoping that the additional time would allow them to cook up a rotten "compromise" deal with government negotiators. Shortly thereafter, the Ford government unveiled legislation, Bill 124, that will cap "increases" in total wage and benefit compensation for a million Ontario other public sector workers, including teachers, at 1 percent per year for the next four coming four years. When inflation is taken into account, this will amount to a significant real-terms pay cut.

Already in March the Ford government initiated a major attack on teachers and public education with its announcement that it will raise the high school class-size average by the equivalent of six students, from 22.1 to 28.1, over the next four years. For Grades 4 to 8, the class-size average will be raised by one student to 24.5. The impact of these changes will be to eliminate close to 10,000 teaching jobs.

Additionally, the government has rewritten the province's sex education curriculum, which has been the target of fierce denunciations from the religious right and their far-right allies and is changing the way that math is taught to focus more on rote learning.

According to the OSSTF, the increased class-size average will result in the elimination of 3,630 frontline teaching positions at schools it represents. OSSTF President Harvey Bischof has warned that the new policy could result in class sizes for core subjects, like math, swelling to 40 or more students, while making it harder for schools to offer specialized subjects that require small class sizes. The Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association projected that an additional 5,000 posts will be lost in the province's government-supported "separate school" system.

Parent and student groups have protested against the proposed class-size increases. As well as opposition to the government's class-size increases, curriculum changes, 'teaching to test' recommendations and retrograde sex education policy, a wave of opposition has emerged to Ford's across-the-board cuts to education funding. This includes the slashing of \$235 million from special education programs.

Last April, about 100,000 students walked out of schools across the province and held rallies to oppose the government's assault on public education, and numerous other reactionary measures. A few days later, about ten thousand teachers, parents and students rallied against the Progressive Conservatives' cuts in front of the provincial legislature. These protests 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.

The upsurge of popular opposition to Ford in Ontario is part of a mounting international working-class counteroffensive. This offensive has included major strikes by teachers for better pay and working conditions across the United States, strikes by teachers in Poland and across Europe, and mass mobilizations driven by opposition to austerity, social inequality and authoritarian forms of rule, like the Yellow Vest movement in France and the antigovernment upsurges in Algeria and Sudan.

The protests that have swept Ontario underscore that the teachers' struggle enjoys widespread public support. A strike by teachers in opposition to job cuts and concessions and in defence of public education and other vital public services could serve as the catalyst for the launching of a mass political general strike to bring down the Ford government and its austerity agenda.

It is precisely because of this potential that the teacher unions have refused point blank to countenance any strike action. They oppose mobilizing the independent industrial and political strength of the working class to defend public education, because they fear that the worker protests would quickly escape their control and become a challenge to the austerity agenda of big business and the entire political establishment.

OSSTF president Bischof has already stated that there are, at this time, no plans to arrange a strike vote amongst his membership. However, well aware that support for such a strike is widespread, he told the union's recently held annual conference that the OSSTF's main goal in the weeks ahead is to "cultivate resistance."

Teachers know full well that this is just empty bluster. They have learned from bitter experience that the unions have shown themselves to be the main bulwark in preventing teachers from organizing genuine resistance. Whenever teachers have sought to fight back against government austerity, including during the mass mobilizations of the mid-1990s against the Harris Conservatives' "Common Sense Revolution" or the bitter struggles against the Liberal McGuinty and Wynne governments' attacks, the unions have stepped in to smother their opposition and suppress the class struggle.

This truth applies all the more under conditions in which the teacher unions, alongside the entire union bureaucracy, are engaged in an all-out campaign to reelect the federal Liberal

government of Justin Trudeau. They have no intention of sanctioning any mass struggles that could cut across their close relationship with this pro-corporate, right-wing government that has criminalized strikes, handed over billions in additional funding to the military, kept public services on rations and maintained ultra-low taxes for big business and the rich.

To oppose austerity, fight Ford's attacks, and defend public education, teachers must recognize that they are engaged in a political struggle that demands the independent political mobilization of the working class. They must draw the lessons of the struggles waged by educators in the United States and internationally, as well as by Mexican *maquiladora* autoworkers and other sections of the working class, who have rebelled against the trade union bureaucrats, so as to assert their class interests. They must also prepare to confront the full force of the bourgeois state, including the impending threat of antistrike legislation, which Ford has said he is more than ready to impose.

To this end, teachers should form rank-and-file action committees, independently of and in opposition to the right-wing trade unions apparatuses, with the aim of mobilizing the entire working class against the Ontario government's onslaught on public services and workers' rights. These committees should answer any attempt to criminalize teacher job action by calling for a political general strike to topple the Ford government. Ford's class-war assault can be stopped only if teachers unite their struggle in a common fight with working people throughout the province, across Canada, and internationally and on the basis of a socialist program that puts the needs of working people before capitalist profit.

The author also recommends:

Build rank-and-file committees to prepare a political general strike against Ontario's Doug Ford

[15 July 2019]

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[9 April 2019]



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