

Ontario education unions disarm teachers, support staff facing attack on jobs and conditions

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Ontario's education unions are working to sabotage the resistance of teachers and support-staff to the Conservative government's assault on public education and the jobs and working conditions of education workers.

Since Aug. 31, close to 250,000 public school teachers and support staff have been working without a contract. None of the five unions involved has called a strike or even set a strike deadline. The Canadian Union of Public Employees, which bargains on behalf of 55,000 support and administrative staff, is the only union to have even initiated a strike vote. But union officials have signaled that any job action will be limited to a work-to-rule campaign or, at most, time- and regionally-limited walkouts.

As soon as the Donald Trump wannabe Doug Ford won office in the June 2018 provincial election, his government moved to slash public spending, impose public-sector hiring freezes, gut labour standards, and provide new tax breaks to big business. In March, the Tories announced they were increasing class sizes at both the elementary and secondary school level, and instructed local school boards not to replace departing staff. This has already led to hundreds of job cuts at schools across the province, with union estimates predicting that the equivalent of 10,000 teaching posts will be lost in coming years as the class-size increases take full effect.

Then in April, with bargaining looming, Ford all but publicly vowed that his government will use back-to-work legislation to criminalize any teachers strike. In June, Ford rendered the entire bargaining process all but meaningless, when his government introduced legislation limiting wage and benefit increases for one million provincial public sector workers to a miserly 1 percent per year for the next three years. When inflation is taken into account, this will amount to a cut in real incomes for workers whose living standards have already been squeezed under the austerity program of the previous Ontario Liberal government.

In the face of Ford's efforts to gut public education, the

unions are working to politically disarm and divide teachers and their supporters. Although the onslaught on the education system is taking place across the board, each teachers union is engaged in separate bargaining with the government in what can only be described as a deliberate effort to prevent education workers from uniting around common demands and mounting a joint struggle.

The Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF), which represents some 70,000 members, initially appealed to Ford to open contract talks early. When government negotiators predictably refused to participate in meaningful talks, the union filed a case with the Ontario Labour Relations Board (OLRB), an ostensibly "impartial," pro-big business state body that has a long record of outlawing strikes by teachers and other workers.

OSSTF officials stressed that their main purpose in turning to the OLRB was to press for as many issues involved in the contract talks to be bargained at the local level, i.e., with individual school boards, rather than as part of the province-wide negotiations. In other words, while Ford and his henchmen take the axe to spending on public education across the board, the OSSTF aimed to divert teachers into a futile scramble for a few crumbs from local budgets that have already been squeezed dry. Last week, the OLRB ruled against the OSSTF.

A significant factor in the union bureaucrats' efforts to drag out the negotiations is their fear that the teachers struggle could disrupt their efforts to muster support for the re-election of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his federal Liberal government.

The unions' staunch support for a government that has sharply hiked military spending, slashed billions from health care, criminalized strikes, and attacked democratic rights shows whose side they really are on. It underlines that their denunciations of Ford are driven by tactical differences with his agenda, rather than opposition to the corporate elite's drive to increase the "competitiveness" of Canadian

capitalism through an assault on workers' living standards and social rights.

What the unions are actually striving for is a seat at the table, wherein they will collaborate with big business and government in imposing savage attacks on workers, as they have done under the Trudeau Liberals.

What Trudeau lauded at the recent Unifor convention as a "special partnership" between the unions and his big business Liberals was in fact first pioneered in Ontario, with the OSSTF and the other teachers unions playing a leading role. For 15 years, beginning in 2003, they, Unifor, and the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) closely collaborated with the McGuinty and Wynne Liberal governments, as they slashed social spending, cut corporate taxes, imposed pay freezes on teachers and enforced them with anti-strike laws.

A mass working-class mobilization against the Ford government would disrupt the ruling elite's carefully choreographed election campaign and undermine the unions' fraudulent efforts to portray the Liberals as a "progressive" alternative to Andrew Scheer's Conservatives.

For that reason, Ontario's education unions have effectively conspired to postpone any teacher job action until after election day, Oct. 21. They know full well that this hands the initiative to the Ford government, which is preparing to use the full force of the state to ram through its class-size increases and concession demands.

A second concern for the union bureaucrats is the growth of militancy more broadly within the working class. Just across the border in the United States, over 150,000 autoworkers are determined to launch a strike when contracts expire later this week at Ford, General Motors and Fiat-Chrysler. Following years of concessions imposed by management and the corrupt UAW, workers want wage increases, job security and an end to the two-tier wage system. Worker militancy has already spread to Ontario, with auto parts workers launching wildcat strikes to protest the elimination of their jobs once GM stops car assembly in Oshawa at the end of the year.

Doug Ford's reactionary agenda has already sparked mass opposition. Last spring, tens of thousands of students walked out of their classrooms across the province to protest his class-size hikes and attacks on teachers. Thirty thousand people joined a march for public education outside the provincial legislature in April. Smaller protests, many of them organized independently of the unions, have occurred regularly over the past nine months to protest health care cuts, the slashing of support for families with autistic children and attacks to the province's legal aid program. Widespread opposition has also emerged among college and university students to the government's gutting of student

aid.

The pro-capitalist unions rightly recognize and fear that a strike by teachers, under these conditions, could trigger a much broader movement that they would struggle to control.

But it is precisely for such a unified struggle that Ontario teachers, students, and their supporters must fight. The teachers struggle coincides with a resurgence of the class struggle in Canada and internationally. This has included the development of mass protest movements like the Yellow Vests in France and the demonstrations in Hong Kong, strikes by teachers and education staff across Europe, including in Poland, and strikes by manufacturing workers in Matamoros, Mexico. These struggles have developed in opposition to the trade unions, which around the world have proven themselves to be nothing more than appendages of big business and the capitalist state.

To take forward a genuine struggle against Ford's attacks, teachers must form action committees in every school entirely independently of the union apparatuses. They must be supported by students, parents, and residents through the establishment of action committees in workplaces and neighbourhoods across the province. These committees should demand a well-funded public education system, the reinstatement of all education staff already laid off, and a substantial wage increase to account for the pay freezes imposed by Liberal and Conservative governments alike.

Achieving these demands requires that urgent preparations be made for strike action by all teachers and support staff and for defiance of any back-to-work law. But this strategy can be successful only if teachers make their struggle the starting point for the mass mobilization of the working class in a political struggle against the austerity agenda of the entire ruling elite. A political general strike to drive the Ford government from office must serve as the catalyst for the development of an independent political movement of the working class across Canada, aimed at bringing to power a workers' government that would use the vast resources at society's disposal to meet social needs, such as a high-quality education system, rather than further enrich the bloated capitalist elite.

This author also recommends:

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

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