Ontario education workers set to strike Monday against Ford's savage cuts

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Less than three days after initiating a toothless work-to-rule protest, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) was forced Wednesday to set a Monday, Oct. 7, strike deadline for 55,000 Ontario public and state-funded school support staff.

The union was clearly under heavy rank-and-file pressure to act in the face of the provocative actions of many school boards and the hardline bargaining stance of the provincial Progressive Conservative government, led by the right-wing populist and Trump wannabe Doug Ford.

Laura Walton, president of CUPE's Ontario School Board Council of Unions, told a press conference Wednesday the union had hoped to avoid moving toward a strike. But "without any justification whatsoever, some school boards are closing programs and sending workers home." "Across the province," continued Walton, "boards are cutting services and putting students at risk."

CUPE coupled its strike deadline announcement with an appeal for the resumption of negotiations. On Friday, talks resumed with the union saying it was ready to bargain round-the-clock throughout the weekend.

Despite the anger against the government's savage education cuts among the support-staff workers—who include school custodians, clerical workers, education assistants, and early childhood educators—and broad public support for their struggle, it is entirely possible CUPE will move to scuttle the strike even before it begins.

CUPE is doing nothing to mobilize popular support for the education workers under conditions in which many of the province's school boards, including the three largest, have announced they will shut their schools down as soon as the strike is launched. Such action would be seized on by the corporate media to press for government intervention. The Ford government, for its part, has previously threatened to criminalize a strike by the province's teachers, or any major section of them.

Education workers want to oppose Ford's savaging of the public education system, which has already seen hundreds of support staff and teachers laid off. According to a recently released parliamentary Budget Office report, just the class-size increases that the government has announced will result in over 10,000 teaching positions being eliminated over the next five years. As a result of these and other cuts, entire study programs, extracurricular activities, desperately needed repairs to school buildings and support services for students with additional learning needs have or are being axed across the province.

The support-staff contract struggle is also a test case for the government's vow, soon to be backed by legislation, to limit total increases in wages and benefits for one million public sector workers to just one percent per annum for the next four years. Another major issue in dispute is the government's demands for sweeping cuts to sick pay.

Close to 250,000 teachers and education workers in Ontario's public school system have been working without contracts since the end of August. The five unions representing them are doing everything in their power to sabotage a struggle against Ford, including by conducting separate negotiations and refusing to mount a joint struggle against the education cuts and the government's real-terms wage-and benefits cuts.

No sooner had CUPE announced its Monday strike deadline than the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF) declared it would order its members to cross CUPE picket lines. The other teachers unions soon followed suit.

The unions are terrified a strike will result in a head-on clash with the hated Ford government and trigger a broader working-class challenge to the austerity agenda of the entire ruling elite that could quickly escape their control. Instead, they are looking for ways to collaborate with the government in enforcing its cost-cutting measures.

The OSSTF provided stark confirmation of this when it publicly released some of its initial negotiating proposals last month.

Claiming that it is necessary to remove "endless wrangling" over "compensation," OSSTF negotiators proposed a real-terms pay freeze, with annual "increases"

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limited to the 2.2 percent inflation rate. In the OSSTF's own words, "inflationary adjustments such as this keep the real wage increase to zero."

The union is also proposing the introduction of unpaid days off for teachers, with savings to be returned to the education budget. According to the OSSTF, absences provide "a stream of revenue to the employer" because substitute teachers are paid less, and in some cases, absent teachers are not replaced at all.

The union is thus proposing to punish teachers for absences, without any concern for the deplorable conditions including chronic staff shortages, overcrowded classes, decrepit school buildings and an increase in violence that has contributed to an alarming 15–20 percent of absences—a percentage that the union describes as "reasonable." The OSSTF has also proposed a joint government-union committee to implement online learning for some student programs, a measure introduced by Ford that will lead to a vast decline in the quality of education.

CUPE's sanctioning of a strike is no exception to the unions' right-wing, corporatist policies. Unless rank-and-file education workers take control of their struggle out of CUPE's hands, the union bureaucracy will exploit any job action as a cynical stunt to allow workers to let off steam and prepare the ground for a rotten sellout.

CUPE is Canada's largest union, representing some 650,000 public sector workers across the country. All of these workers confront similar attacks to those faced by the 55,000 education workers in Ontario, including budget cuts, wage freezes, layoffs and greater workloads. However, the union is not calling for solidarity action from its membership, never mind a common fight by all public sector workers against capitalist austerity.

While CUPE seeks to isolate the school board support staff and force them to fight on their knees, the ruling elite is proceeding with its attacks with unrestrained ruthlessness. As soon as the federal election is completed, the Ford government plans to recall the provincial legislature to enshrine its one percent per annum cap in wage and benefit increases for Ontario public sector workers. CUPE alone has hundreds of thousands of members who will be impacted by this attack, yet it has taken no action to initiate a common fight against it. Unifor, the OSSTF and the Ontario Federation of Labour are no less complicit, having done absolutely nothing to organize a single significant protest against Ford's Bill 124, let alone prepare strike action against it.

The unions' refusal to mobilize working class opposition to these vicious attacks is bound up with their political subordination to the pro-war, pro-austerity Liberals and New Democratic Party. The well-heeled union bureaucrats view a mass working class mobilization against the Ford government as a disruption to their campaign to promote the Liberals and Justin Trudeau as a "progressive" alternative to Andrew Scheer's Conservatives ahead of the October 21 federal election.

The way forward for teachers, students and their supporters is a unified struggle, waged independently of the pro-capitalist trade unions.

Whether CUPE members walk off the job Monday or the union calls off the strike, education workers must form independent strike committees in every school entirely independent of the union apparatuses. They must be supported by students, parents and other working people through the establishment of action committees in workplaces and neighbourhoods across the province to support and expand the strike. 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 compensate for the pay freezes imposed by previous Liberal and Conservative governments.

But CUPE members cannot win this fight alone. The strike must be immediately expanded to all 250,000 teachers and education workers without a contract. Striking education workers should also appeal for solidarity from workers in other areas of the public sector, striking General Motors workers in the United States, and GM and auto parts workers facing the loss of their jobs with the shuttering of GM's Oshawa plant.

The most fatal error striking education workers could make is to accept the unions' bogus presentation of the current struggle as simply a collective bargaining dispute. Education workers are embroiled in a political struggle against the Ford government, which is readying back-to-work legislation, and against the austerity agenda of the entire capitalist elite.

School board support staff must prepare to defy any attempt to criminalize their job action. This means making the struggle against the Ford government's assault on public education the spearhead of a political general strike to bring down the Ford government and the development of a mass movement for a workers' government, which would use society's vast wealth to fund essential services for all, not the further enrichment of the ruling capitalist oligarchy.

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