

CUPE torpedoed Ontario school support-staff strike, accepts Ford's wage and budget cuts

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With just hours to go before 55,000 Ontario public and state-supported Roman Catholic school support-staff were set to strike against the provincial Conservative government's assault on public education and the workers who administer it, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) reached a tentative agreement Sunday evening with the province's hated Doug Ford-led government.

CUPE is refusing to release details of the proposed three-year agreement until it has been submitted to ratification votes. That process expected to take three weeks or more.

However, it is already abundantly clear that CUPE has agreed to a sell-out contract that strengthens the hand of Ford and his Progressive Conservative government as they press forward with imposing savage cuts on education, including dramatic class-size increases, as part of their across-the-board austerity agenda.

The government has boasted and CUPE officials have effectively conceded that the proposed contract conforms with the government's plan—soon to be enacted in law—to limit wage increases for one million public sector workers to just 1 percent per year for the next three years. When inflation, currently running at more than 2 percent is taken into account, this will amount to a substantial cut in the real wages of workers who have already been subject to years of “wage restraint” under the previous Ontario Liberal government.

CUPE was forced to announce a strike deadline last week, just two days after initiating a work-to-rule campaign, in response to a groundswell of rank-and-file anger against Ford's cost-cutting measures and the provocative reprisals taken by many school boards.

Had the strike proceeded it would have placed the school custodians, education assistants, early childhood educators and other school support staff on a collision course with the Ford government, which has repeatedly threatened to criminalize worker job action to “keep

schools open.” Dozens of school boards—including the province's three largest—had said they would shut down as soon as the strike began due to health and safety concerns.

It was precisely because the support-staff strike had the potential to spark a showdown with the Ford government that CUPE was so determined to smother it before it began. The CUPE leadership was also no doubt concerned about the impact an upsurge in class struggle in the country's most populous province would have on the union bureaucracy's efforts to re-elect Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his Liberal government. Canadians go to the polls on Monday, Oct. 21.

CUPE's refusal to release the details of the tentative agreement is a flagrant violation of workers' democratic rights. The union bureaucracy wants to keep a tight lid on the provisions of the proposed contract, so that workers don't have time to carefully study and debate them, and are entirely reliant on self-serving union promotional materials when they vote.

At CUPE's Sunday evening press conference, lead negotiator Laura Walton claimed that the union had met workers' concerns about job cuts and deteriorating conditions for students and education workers alike by securing a government pledge to invest an additional \$20 million in the province's school system.

It is unclear whether the \$20 million is a one-shot investment, or per year for the life of the contract. In either case, it is a drop in the proverbial bucket under conditions where the government is cutting billions from the education budget over the next three years.

Yet Walton had the audacity to claim that CUPE had forced the government to open “the piggy bank.” In reality, Ford and his Conservatives have already raided it to pay for corporate tax cuts and other investment incentives to make Ontario “open for business.”

The union claims to have beat back the government's

demand for sweeping concessions on sick pay. Education Minister Stephen Lecce, for his part, said that both sides had made “incremental gains.”

Even if the government did withdraw some of its concession demands, this will be cold comfort for the largely low-paid school support workers. Should CUPE succeed in pushing through the proposed contract, they will be forced to get by for years to come on falling real wages, while working in severely under-resourced schools.

More fundamentally, CUPE’s sellout of the education workers significantly weakens the struggle to defend public education. It sets the stage for the government to press forward with imposing real-wage cuts and other concessions on the almost 200,000 Ontario teachers, whose contracts, like those of the school support staff, expired August 31.

Using the precedent set in the CUPE contract, Ford will push for the four teachers’ unions—the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF), the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario (ETFO), the Ontario English Catholic Teachers’ Association (OECTA), and *L’Association des enseignantes et des enseignants franco-ontariens* (AEFO)—to accept similar agreements that cut real wages and enshrine the government’s education cuts.

And he will be kicking at an open door. The OSSTF has already revealed its negotiating “demands.” They include a “net zero” pay increase, an offer to jointly enforce regressive changes to the curriculum, like E-learning, and acceptance of unpaid days-off for teachers in order to cut the education budget.

Underscoring that the teachers’ unions have no intention of mounting a genuine struggle against the Ford government and its class-war austerity agenda, each of the four teacher unions is bargaining separately.

Education workers’ struggle to defend their rights and wages and oppose the gutting of public education, including the elimination of more than 10,000 teaching jobs over the next four years, could and must become the catalyst for a much broader mobilization of the working class against capitalist austerity.

Since the beginning of the year, hundreds of thousands of workers and young people across Ontario have participated in protests against cuts to healthcare, legal aid, student assistance, and school budgets. General Motors and auto parts workers have protested and taken strike action against the loss of their jobs. On Sept. 27, some 700,000 people took to the streets in cities across Canada to protest the ruling elite’s refusal to take

meaningful action to prevent climate change.

These growing signs of a radicalization of the working class across Canada coincide with a resurgence of the class struggle internationally.

In the face of such strikes and protests, the ruling elite is increasingly turning to state repression and the promotion of far-right forces. Ford, for example, has vowed to criminalize a teachers’ strike, repeatedly depicted opponents of his austerity measures as violent extremists, and threatened to make use of the anti-democratic “notwithstanding clause” to run roughshod over basic rights “guaranteed” in Canada’s constitution.

CUPE’s sellout agreement underscores yet again the urgent necessity of teachers and support staff taking control of their struggle in their own hands. Action committees independent of the pro-capitalist unions and controlled by the rank-and-file must be organized to fight for higher wages, increased education budgets, more classroom supplies, and repairs to school buildings, and to prepare defiance of any government strikebreaking law.

Education and other public services can only be defended through a political struggle that challenges not only the Ford government, but the entire ruling elite, including the Trudeau Liberals, who are no less dedicated to imposing big business’ agenda of increased worker exploitation at home and imperialist aggression abroad. Education workers and their supporters must begin preparations for a political general strike to bring down the Ford government, as part of the development of a cross-Canada working-class political offensive for a workers’ government committed to socialist policies that put human needs before private profit.



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