

Canada's pseudo-left Fightback supports wage cuts for Ontario education workers

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The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) reached an 11th-hour agreement with Ontario's hard-right Conservative government earlier this month, scuttling a threatened strike by 55,000 public and separate (publicly-funded Roman Catholic) school support staff.

The proposed three-year contract is a betrayal of the school board workers and of the broader fight against Ontario Premier Doug Ford's class-war agenda, including his assault on public education.

Yet the pseudo-left Fightback group has hailed the tentative CUPE contract as a "victory," and is citing it as proof that the unions can be pressured into mobilizing the working class against the hated Ford government. In reality, the unions, whether open supporters of the Liberals like Unifor or electoral allies of the social democratic NDP like CUPE, have done everything to frustrate and smother working class opposition to the Ford government. The proposed CUPE contract is further proof of this.

CUPE has bowed to the government's demand that the education workers, who have already been the target of years of "wage austerity," receive total wage and benefit increases of just 1 percent per year for the next three years. With inflation, currently running at 2 percent, this would mean a further significant real-terms wage cut for the poorly-paid school support staff.

Moreover, as government spokespersons and supporters were quick to crow, the CUPE agreement sets a precedent for the entire public sector. If CUPE is able to secure its ratification, the school board contract would be the first major agreement to enshrine the three-year, 1 percent per annum "total labor compensation" framework that the Ford government has vowed to impose on 1 million Ontario public sector workers.

By further dividing education workers, CUPE's betrayal also strengthens Ford's hand in his drive to dramatically increase class size caps and eliminate more than 10,000 teaching jobs.

For Fightback, all of this is of no consequence. It has enthusiastically recycled the CUPE bureaucrats' lies about the school support staff agreement. In an article titled "Education workers' strike shows weak Ford government can be defeated," Fightback lauds the proposed contract as a "significant victory," because it has put "a stop to general cuts." In fact, not even CUPE has dared claim that the contract's provisions have reversed all of Ford's cuts to education services and school support; merely that it reverses some of them and restores funding for 1,000 support staff jobs for the next three years. In the same vein, Fightback plays up the government's withdrawal of its demand for significant changes to sick leave as an "important victory."

The article is a textbook example of how Fightback serves as apologists and political salesmen for the corrupt union bureaucracy.

With its blather about "victories" and "wins," it lends support to an agreement that would impose real wage and benefit cuts on workers who make on average just \$38,000 per year, and obscures the fact that the unions are intentionally playing into the government's hands by dividing education workers along sectional lines.

Indeed, the right-wing union apparatuses have been systematically dividing the 250,000 education workers whose contracts expired August 31, although it has been clear since early this year that the Ford government is determined to savage quality public education, with the class size increases serving as its spearhead. CUPE and each of 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 the *Association des enseignantes et des enseignants franco-ontariens* (AEFO)—have insisted on pursuing separate negotiations with the government and opposed any and all calls for joint job action.

Having lavished praise on the CUPE sellout and implicitly endorsed its short-circuiting of a strike authorized by a massive 90 percent-plus strike vote, Fightback does make a belated attempt to save its "radical" credentials. "CUPE," it opines, "could have done more to oppose ... the Ford government's one percent wage cap." However, Fightback doesn't urge the school support staff to vote down the proposed agreement and join teachers in a working class political offensive against Ford and the austerity agenda of the ruling class as a whole.

Especially revealing is the manner in which Fightback deals with CUPE's scuttling of the impending school board support staff strike. For starters, the headline on its apologia for the CUPE sellout, "Education workers' strike shows weak Ford government can be defeated," is an outright lie, since the strike was shut down by CUPE before it even began. In the body of the article, Fightback adopts the language of the capitalist press, saying the strike "was averted," but not who averted it or how, before uncritically citing the claim of the lead CUPE negotiator, Laura Walton, that the union "gave up nothing." It makes no mention of the union's immediate shutting down of the work-to-rule campaign CUPE had reluctantly launched at the beginning of the week.

Finally and most tellingly of all, excluded from Fightback's account is the line in the CUPE press release that acknowledges that the union accepted a concessionary contract because it was desperate to avert a head-on clash with the Ford government, which was preparing to answer a strike with a back-to-work law.

"Walton," said CUPE, "noted that she and her bargaining team were pleased that they were able to bargain a freely negotiated collective

agreement to recommend to CUPE members.”

Ford has repeatedly threatened to criminalize any strike that shuts down Ontario schools and has tabled legislation (Bill 124) to enforce the government’s three-year 1 percent-per-year cap on wage and benefit increases. The CUPE sellout was “freely negotiated” only because the union apparatus itself assumed the role of enforcing the real wage cut and agreed to assist the government in isolating the teachers, its main target in the current negotiations.

If the union bowed before Ford’s threats, it is not because his Tory government is strong. But because the union bureaucrats are terrified that a strike in defence of public education could quickly escape their control, threaten to bring down the Ford government, and become the catalyst for a broader working class challenge to the entire capitalist order.

Since Ford’s election in June 2018, the unions have done everything in their power to stymie and contain popular opposition. The unions’ opposition to a working class challenge to Ford is epitomized by the countdown clock atop the Ontario Federation of Labour homepage. It measures *to the second* the time until the next provincial vote in June 2022 and the election of a “progressive government,” that is, a government led by one of the two pro-war, pro-austerity opposition parties, the Liberals and NDP.

Defenders of the unions and NDP

While spouting the occasional “radical,” even Marxist-sounding phrases, Fightback functions as left apologists for and defenders of the unions and NDP. It works to uphold their waning authority, which has been undermined by their decades-long suppression of the class struggle and complicity in the imposition of wage and job cuts, and the dismantling of public services.

Fightback never breathed a word of criticism of Unifor for its adamant opposition to uniting Canadian and US GM workers against the automaker’s wave of plant closures. When, after months of spewing anti-Mexican chauvinism, the leadership of the Oshawa GM Unifor local sent a message of “support” to the union that shut down the wildcat strikes in Matamoros, Mexico, Fightback hailed the action as demonstrating Unifor’s supposed potential to unite North American autoworkers.

Similarly, Fightback provided alibis for the Steelworkers union’s systematic isolation of the locked out workers at the ABI aluminum smelter in Quebec. The imposition of a concessions-filled contract was not, claimed Fightback, due to the bureaucracy’s corporatist, nationalist politics, but an unfavourable “balance of forces.”

As for the NDP, Fightback promotes it and its sister social democratic parties as potential instruments for opposing austerity and even fighting for socialism. No matter that these parties shredded long, long ago their national reformist programs, have imposed austerity for decades, and have been indistinguishable from the traditional parties of the right in their support for war and rearmament.

The NDP and its union allies are well aware of Fightback’s readiness to provide them with desperately needed left cover. That is why Fightback is tolerated as an official “opposition” within the NDP.

On the international stage, Fightback’s role is no less politically pernicious. The international grouping to which it belongs, the misnamed International Marxist Tendency (IMT), hailed the rise of

the Greek pseudo-left party Syriza, which rose to power exploiting mass opposition to austerity, then imposed social spending, pension and minimum wage cuts even more savage than its right-wing predecessors. In Britain, the IMT has spent the last four years claiming that the election of a Labour Party government under Jeremy Corbyn would strike a blow for working people. Meantime, the “left” social democrat Corbyn has surrendered to the Blairite right wing right down the line and demobilized the working class, allowing the pro-Brexit Thatcherite Boris Johnson and the pro-Remain faction of the bourgeoisie to seize the initiative.

Workers must take these developments and Fightback’s support for CUPE’s enforcing of Ford’s austerity as a warning.

Following last week’s federal election, Justin Trudeau’s Liberal government will be even more reliant on the support of the trade unions and NDP to ram through its right-wing, anti-working class agenda. The Canadian ruling elite’s preferred party of government intends to spend tens of billions of dollars on the military, further integrate Canada into US military offensives around the world, and intensify austerity and attacks on democratic rights to pay for rearmament, make Canadian capitalism more “globally competitive” and suppress popular opposition. When the NDP and unions help enforce this reactionary agenda, Fightback will be ready with its “Marxist” and “revolutionary” rhetoric to provide the social democrats and their union allies with much needed “left” cover.

Contrary to Fightback, teachers and education workers cannot beat back Ford’s austerity agenda within the framework of a collective bargaining dispute. Instead, workers must break politically and organizationally from the pro-capitalist unions and NDP, establish their own class struggle action committees to organize a political general strike to bring down Ford; and build a mass cross-Canada movement for a workers’ government. As the Socialist Equality Party explained in its recent statement “Build rank-and-file committees to prepare a political general strike against Ontario’s Doug Ford!,” such a working class political struggle must be animated by a socialist and internationalist program.



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