

# Massive vote in favour of strike by Ontario elementary school teachers

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Ontario elementary public school teachers voted overwhelmingly in favour of authorizing a strike against plans by the right-wing Conservative government of Doug Ford to cut close to \$1 billion in education spending. The more than 83,000 public educators represented by the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario (ETFO), who have been without a contract since August, voted 98 percent in favour of strike action.

The virtual unanimous support for a strike reflects the depth of hostility among the working class to the Ford government's agenda of savage austerity and is part of the growth of working-class militancy internationally. In addition to its education spending cuts, Ford has slashed healthcare funding, cut spending on critical social services, like legal aid, and banned workers' strikes. Evidence of worker opposition has grown since the spring of this year, including major demonstrations over education and healthcare cuts, walkouts by hundreds of thousands of high school students, and an overwhelming strike vote by 55,000 Canadian Union of Public Employees school support staff.

Despite the huge strike mandate from elementary school teachers, the ETFO has failed to even select a strike date. This is part and parcel of the unions' suppression of the developing struggle by teachers and education workers to defend public education from savage cuts by the Ford government. Last month, CUPE similarly disregarded the strike vote of its membership and concluded a rotten last-minute concessions deal with the Ford government that sabotaged the strike on the eve of its planned October 7 launch.

CUPE's tentative agreement complied with the reactionary provisions of the Ford government's Bill 124, which limits total earnings and benefits increases

for 1 million public sector workers to 1 percent per year for the next three years. Factoring in inflation, which currently stands at over 2 percent, this constitutes a significant reduction in real wages, on top of decades of austerity and "wage restraint" under the previous Ontario union-backed Liberal government. Having been sold out by their union and realizing that the CUPE bureaucrats have no intention of waging a genuine struggle for workers' interests, school support staff reluctantly backed the deal in a union-organized vote by 79 percent.

The Ford government celebrated the CUPE agreement and intends to use it as a precedent to implement Bill 124 into law for all public sector workers in the province.

The provincial government's planned cuts to education include increasing class sizes from 23 to 24 students for grades four to eight and from 22 to 28 in high schools, eliminating local caps on class sizes, reducing per-pupil funding to local boards, as well as mandatory e-learning classes for high school students. This will result in the elimination of more than 10,000 teaching positions and a drastic reduction in course offerings and education quality.

CUPE's last-minute sabotage of the strike by education workers and ETFO's refusal to set a strike date in spite of an almost unanimous vote in favour of job action are merely two examples of the union bureaucracy's role as the chief obstacle to any fight by workers for better pay and working conditions. Their overriding goal is to avert strikes at all costs, lest they galvanize workers and offer a serious challenge to the Ford government. ETFO, like CUPE and the three other provincial teachers' unions—the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF), the Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association

(OECTA) and *Association des enseignantes et des enseignants franco-ontariens* (AEFO)—are each pursuing their own separate talks with the government, dividing education workers and teachers along sectional lines.

After months of issuing pathetic appeals to the Ford government to take bargaining seriously, the OSSTF leadership finally announced that it would commence strike votes last month. The union says the strike vote will be concluded by November 15, with a huge majority of high school teachers expected to vote in favour. But the union leadership has no intention of conducting a fight on this basis. OSSTF President Harvey Bischof indicated as much when he declared that his union is striving for a “positive and peaceful” resolution of the talks with the government, and praised CUPE’s sellout deal as a model for agreements in other sectors.

But there can be no “positive and peaceful” solution with a government that, with the backing of the entire financial elite, is restructuring class relations to make Ontario “open for business.” This was underscored late last month when Ford’s negotiators made great play of a generous offer to the OSSTF that would reduce their province-wide increase in class sizes by 3 students, to 25. But in the same breath, this purported concession was made meaningless by the government’s announcement that it would abolish regional class size caps set by local school boards.

The unions’ determination to isolate, weaken and ultimately strangle teachers’ and school support workers’ resistance to the Ford government’s attacks on education is inseparable from their political alliance with the pro-austerity, pro-war Liberals and New Democratic Party (NDP). The unions want to suppress the class struggle at all costs and are bitterly opposed to sanctioning an open confrontation with the widely despised Premier Ford. This is because it would cut across their attempt to portray the Liberals and NDP, who have carried out no less brutal attacks on workers whenever they have held power, as “progressive” alternatives to the Tories.

To take forward their struggle, teachers and education workers must form their own independent action committees in opposition to the unions. They must recognize that their struggle is a political struggle, pitting them not only against Ford, but all of the

establishment political parties. Teachers and education workers should turn towards their class brothers and sisters in other sectors of the economy and internationally to build a movement to fight for decent jobs, higher wages, and high-quality public education and other essential services. This means a direct onslaught on the capitalist profit system, and the fight for a workers’ government.



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