

Ontario high school teachers stage one-day walkout Wednesday

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More than 60,000 Ontario high school teachers will walk off the job today in opposition to the sweeping cuts the provincial Conservative government is making to education and their terms of employment.

The Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF) has said that the walkout will be called off if a deal is reached with government negotiators by midnight Tuesday. But by all accounts that is an impossibility. "In three and a half days of bargaining," said OSSTF President Harvey Bishof Tuesday afternoon, "they have not made one proposal to move things forward."

The one-day strike, the first province-wide walkout by Ontario high school teachers in 22 years, is indicative of teachers' determination to resist real-terms wage cuts, increased class sizes, the slashing of support staff, and the introduction of mandatory e-learning courses. In a strike vote last month, the teachers, who have been working without a contract since August 31, voted 95.5 percent in favour of strike action.

The fact that teachers have remained on the job without a contract for over three months and are now only striking for one day is due solely to the right-wing politics of the OSSTF leadership. The union is determined to head off a direct clash between the working class and Ontario's right-wing populist premier, Doug Ford, and his Tory government.

From the outset, the OSSTF and the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) have sought to prevent a teachers strike, including by appealing to the anti-worker Ontario Labour Relations Board to intervene in stalled bargaining with the government. Only when confronted with an overwhelming strike vote and fearing that the opposition among teachers could escape its control did union president Harvey Bischof and his fellow bureaucrats sanction a one-day walkout.

The OSSTF's stalling and the refusal of the four Ontario teachers' unions to join forces against a government manifestly intent on bludgeoning the teachers and public education has handed the initiative to Ford and his henchmen, who have savaged spending on public education and other critical services in the 18 months since they came

to power.

Ford and his ministers have repeatedly signaled that they are readying back-to-work legislation to criminalize teacher strikes.

This underscores the fact that teachers are engaged not in a mere collective bargaining dispute, but a political struggle against the austerity agenda of the capitalist ruling class and its repressive state apparatus. If teachers are to prevail, they must make their struggle the spearhead of a working-class counteroffensive against austerity and anti-strike laws and in defence of public education, health care and all public services.

The Ford government has unveiled cuts approaching \$1 billion per annum for public education, including an increase in high school class sizes from 22 to 28, the destruction of up to 10,000 teaching and support staff positions over the next five years, and the cutting of per-pupil funding to local school boards. In addition, the Ford government has rammed through Bill 124, which imposes a 1 percent annual cap on total wage and benefit increases for the next three years for all 200,000 teachers and support staff at the province's public and publicly-funded Roman Catholic schools, and for 800,000 other Ontario public sector workers.

While high school teachers are striking alone today, opposition is by no means restricted to them. In October, over 95 percent of education support workers represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) voted for strike action, and more than 98 percent of teachers in the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario (ETFO) backed a walkout in a strike vote last month. Teachers in the Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association have voted 97 percent for a strike. Since November 26, ETFO and OSSTF members have been engaged in a work-to-rule campaign.

The unions' actions in suppressing workers' opposition underscore that teachers can only take forward their struggle by breaking free from the suffocating control imposed by the OSSTF, CUPE, the ETFO et al. In October, CUPE totally disregarded the strike vote by its members and concluded a last-minute sellout deal that enshrined Ford's 1 percent pay

and benefits cap.

Since the outset of the current struggle, the education and teachers unions have deliberately sought to divide their members along sectional lines and block a common fight against Ford. Each of the unions is pursuing its own bargaining strategy and plans for rank-and-file “mobilizations,” even though the central issues are common to all public education workers.

The efforts of the teacher unions to suppress worker opposition to Ford’s cuts go hand in hand with the policy pursued by the union bureaucracy as a whole. Under the banner of “The Power of Many,” the Ontario Federation of Labour has refused to call any significant actions against the Tories’ austerity policies and their wage-cutting Bill 124.

Instead, the OFL’s aim is to channel popular opposition behind a union-funded election campaign in 2022 to elect a “progressive” government, i.e., a right-wing, pro-capitalist Liberal or NDP-led government that will continue from where Ford has left off. This policy finds its most glaring expression in the countdown clock to the next provincial election displayed at the top of the OFL’s homepage.

The union’s right-wing agenda demobilizes workers in the face of an onslaught by the ruling elite on wages and living standards, and goes hand-in-hand with their support for the federal Liberal government of Justin Trudeau. Behind phony progressive rhetoric, the Trudeau government is diverting tens of billions from healthcare into buying new fleets of battleships and warplanes, yet the unions trumpeted the Liberals’ claims to oppose “Ford’s cuts” during the just completed federal election campaign.

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The recently-concluded OFL convention, where Patty Coates—a former OSSTF official and the hand-picked successor to outgoing president Chris Buckley—was elected as the OFL’s new president, demonstrates that the unions have no intention of altering their right-wing, anti-worker course.

Teachers entering into struggle must also familiarize themselves with the role played by the unions during the 1997 Ontario teachers strike, which broke out as part of a mass working class upsurge against Conservative Premier Mike Harris and his Thatcherite Common Sense Revolution. (See: The unions’ suppression of the 1995-97 anti-Harris movement: Political lessons for today, Part 1, Part 2, Part 3, Part 4).

Although there was massive public support for the 1997 teachers strike, the unions called it off saying there was nothing that could be done once Harris had dismissed their appeals for him to change course. They were determined to prevent a direct clash with the hated Tory government that

would have posed the question of which class rules society.

Shortly thereafter, the unions shut down the anti-Harris movement and formed a political alliance with the Liberal Party through the Ontario Working Families Coalition. This alliance deepened over the ensuing two decades, even as successive Ontario Liberal governments under Dalton McGuinty and Kathleen Wynne left the key tenets of Harris’ policies in place, and enforced round after round of wage restraint and spending cuts.

The central lesson to be drawn from the unions’ suppression of the class struggle is that teachers and education workers must take control of their struggle into their own hands. The *World Socialist Web Site* proposes the formation of rank-and-file action committees in schools, other workplaces, and neighbourhoods to organize joint strike action against Ford’s reactionary measures by all teachers and education workers. These committees must appeal to other sections of workers for support, including autoworkers facing wage and job cuts and rail workers who recently struck against terrible working conditions. They should also advance teachers’ demands for a substantial pay increase to offset the decades of wage freezes and cuts under successive governments, and the hiring of thousands of additional teachers to reduce class sizes and improve the quality of public education.

These demands, which are essential to the defence of public education, come into direct conflict with the prerogatives of the capitalist elite, who want to starve public services to fill their own pockets and fund a rearmament drive to support the waging of imperialist wars of conquest and plunder around the world.

Teachers must recognize that they are involved in a political struggle that goes far beyond the artificial straightjacket of the collective bargaining process which the unions and Ford seek to impose on them. The defence of decent-paying, secure jobs for teachers and a high quality public education system is possible only if teachers take up the struggle for a political general strike to bring down the Ford government, and the fight for a workers government committed to socialist policies. Only then will the vast resources of society that are currently monopolized by a tiny, super-rich elite be redirected into providing the critical services, like quality public education and healthcare, that the population requires.



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