

Ontario teachers strike against government assault on public education

Our reporters

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Over 60,000 Ontario public high school teachers and school support staff joined a one-day, Ontario-wide strike Wednesday, the first province-wide teachers' strike in over two decades.

The strike, directed against a sweeping assault on public education by Ontario's Doug Ford-led Conservative government, won widespread support from parents and students.

Ontario's teachers, who are divided into four separate unions, have been working without contracts since late August. Over 95 percent of the members of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF), the union that called Wednesday's walkout, voted in favour of strike action last month, expressing their deep opposition to the Tories' demands for a substantial increase in class sizes, a cut in real wages, and deep cuts to local education funding.

As one striking teacher told the *World Socialist Web Site* in Kitchener, "The main thing I want to say is that we are out here for the kids, not for ourselves. What Ford wants to do is absolutely terrible. If you don't have a quality education system, how are you going to give students the tools they need? It's hard enough for kids in this world as it is."

At picket lines across the province, passing motorists honked their horns in support. High school students joined marches to support teachers, including in Toronto.

From the outset the OSSTF, the Ontario Federation of Labour, now headed by former OSSTF official Patty Coates, and the other teachers' unions have sought to demobilize teachers and prevent a head-on confrontation with the hated Conservative government and its Trump wannabe premier, Doug Ford.

The unions fear a teachers strike could spark a broader working class challenge to the Conservatives' sweeping social spending cuts, real-terms pay cuts for one million public sector workers, and the ruling-class austerity

agenda as a whole.

Each of the four teachers unions—the 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*—and the Canadian Union of Public Employees, which represents 55,000 public school support staff, have insisted on separate negotiations and a separate "mobilization" strategy, even though the education workers all confront the same Conservative government assault and their contracts all expired on the same day.

Despite the overwhelming strike vote, the OSSTF restricted this week's job action to one day. It has failed to set a date for a further walkout, let alone an all-out strike.

Speaking to reporters Wednesday, OSSTF President Harvey Bischof made clear the union is determined to limit teachers to futile appeals to the Ford government to reverse course. The purpose of the walkout, said Bischof, was "to raise attention on the cuts that this government is proposing and has already imposed on the education system and to see if we can persuade this government to begin listening."

The other unions are following the same bankrupt course. Despite an equally high strike vote by elementary school teachers last month, the ETFO has set no strike date, merely calling a work-to-rule campaign. The OECTA will be in a legal strike position December 21, but has yet to give any indication of planned job action. And CUPE torpedoed a strike by 55,000 support staff even before it began in October, agreeing to a contract that enshrines Ford's 1 percent pay and benefit cap.

The OSSTF's refusal to mount a genuine struggle has emboldened the Ford government. Education Minister Stephen Lecce arrogantly declared Wednesday morning that the OSSTF was "irresponsible, unreasonable, and

only interested in a pay raise the government can't afford." Premier Doug Ford also weighed in, seeking to turn reality on its head by portraying his government as conciliator. "We're negotiating in good faith," claimed Ford. "We have given a couple of concessions, as a matter of fact, quite a few concessions. I guess the union's not giving us any concessions."

In reality, Ford and his right-wing henchmen are going on the offensive. Earlier this year, Ford declared he wouldn't allow students to be "prevented" from going to school and threatened to answer a teachers strike with back-to-work legislation. When he was asked last week, the premier indicated that his government is already plotting to criminalize future strike action.

The government's "concessions" amount to nothing more than a repackaging of its austerity drive. Lecce offered to reduce the planned increase in the average class size from 22 to 25 students, rather than the original proposed increase of 22 to 28. But this offer became moot, after the government revealed that it wants to abolish all regional class size caps, thereby effectively downloading the responsibility for imposing increased class sizes onto local school boards.

Lecce also made a slight alteration to the government's proposed introduction of mandatory online courses for high school students. The plan is part of the government's drive to cut teaching jobs, since each course would consist of up to 35 students, a significantly higher number than standard classes. Instead of the original plan to ask students to complete four such modules to graduate, the government now says students will need to complete two.

The introduction of online courses in any form has provoked strong opposition. As one striking teacher explained to the WSWs, "One thing that really bothers me is this E-Learning requirement where the government wants to cut classroom time and force kids to take mandatory online courses. How is that going to help anyone? First off, it's a cut-rate learning environment. What if they have questions or want to discuss something? Ford just wants to use it to cut more jobs. I can see it as the thin end of the wedge. A few online courses now and if we don't fight this there will be even more down the road."

The Ford government's imposition, via its Bill 124, of a 1 percent per annum cap on pay and benefit increases for the next three years for over 1 million public sector workers is also facing determined opposition. According to the OSSTF, wage freezes and cuts imposed by successive Liberal and Tory provincial governments mean

that between 2009 and 2018, teachers' wages fell by 6.5 percent in real terms.

As a striker explained to our reporter, "One percent a year? What's inflation? Two, 2.5 percent? So, it's really a wage cut, right? And that 1 percent is supposed to be non-negotiable. It's part of government legislation. So, it's more than just money. It's an attack on free collective bargaining. Just like the Liberals used to do."

The one-day strike by teachers showed, albeit in a limited way, the tremendous social power they have and the high levels of popular support they enjoy for their just demands. But if this potential is to be transformed into a genuine struggle in defence of public education, teachers and their supporters must organize rank-and-file action committees to take the leadership of the struggle out of the hands of the OSSTF and other pro-capitalist unions, and launch an all-out province-wide strike.

Above all, the action committees must make an appeal for solidarity from other sections of workers confronting like attacks. The teachers' fight for decent-paying, secure jobs and a well-funded public education system, just like the struggle by autoworkers to defend their jobs, or rail workers for safe working conditions, is in irreconcilable conflict with the ruling elite's drive to squeeze more profit from working people and divert tens of billions of dollars into arming the Canadian military. That is why teachers must recognize that they are not simply engaged in a collective bargaining dispute, but a political struggle that must have as its goal a political general strike to bring down the Ford government and the development of a mass movement for workers power.



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