

As public support builds for Ontario teachers' struggle, government denounces walkouts

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Ontario's 80,000 elementary school teachers will continue next week the campaign of rotating regional strikes they launched last Monday against the Ontario Conservative government's assault on public education and its demands for a cut in their real wages.

The Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF), one of three other unions that represents teachers at the province's public and publicly funded Catholic schools, is also expected to call at least one-day of regional walkouts next week.

With negotiations stalled due to the government's drive to slash billions in education spending in coming years, Ontario's right-wing populist premier, Doug Ford, and Education Minister Stephen Lecce are trying to lay the political groundwork for using emergency back-to-work legislation to criminalize all teacher job action. In an interaction with reporters Friday, Ford claimed that his government had no plans to suspend teacher' right to strike, but then added, "There is only so long my patience can last."

Already last November, the Conservatives passed legislation , the Protecting a Sustainable Public Sector for Future Generations Act (Bill 124) , that limits wage and benefits increases for the province's almost 200,000 teachers and some 800,000 other public sector workers to just 1 percent per annum—or well below the inflation rate—for the next three years.

Each day this past week, elementary school teachers walked out at different school boards across the province. Reflecting the union's efforts to dissipate working class opposition and prevent a direct clash with the Ford government, the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario (ETFO) made no attempt to coordinate the one-day strikes with the job action planned by the OSSTF and the Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association (OECTA). This is of a piece with the unions' opposition to any joint action and challenge to the government, since the contracts for close to a quarter of a million teachers and education support staff expired last August.

On Tuesday, all 45,000 Catholic teachers walked out in their first day of job action, and on Wednesday the 60,000-member

OSSTF held its fifth day of once per week rotating regional walkouts.

Teachers are determined to rollback hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of cuts to education support services, and to defeat the government's plans to introduce mandatory online courses, and dramatically increase class-sizes in upper grades. The latter measure will result in the cutting of 10,000 teaching jobs and the elimination of many elective courses.

"It's never, never a good thing for class sizes to get bigger," a striking elementary school teacher in Toronto told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "The public knows that. I was amazed at how many cars were honking in our support on the picket line and how many people were stopping by to bring us coffee and doughnuts, and how many parents came by with their kids to walk with us.

"Any salary increases we get are eaten up by inflation, but also by reductions in benefits from past Liberal government contracts. Dental and medical caps on what we can claim have been weakened and that's a big issue for people with health issues. They cut our benefits and then, when some of us need to hold back on our treatments and as a result get sicker, they come after us for absenteeism. They want to have it both ways."

A poll reported on by TVO this week confirms that there is widespread public support for the teachers. Fifty-seven percent of respondents said they support the teachers, while just 30 percent indicated support for the Ford government's class-size increases and cuts.

Another key issue for the teachers is additional support for students with special needs, which the government is in the process of gutting. A veteran elementary school teacher who will be striking in Waterloo on Monday told us, "The government wants to increase class sizes under conditions when there are more and more students with individual needs. Class sizes have grown over time and with this government it will grow even more.

"Lecce just wants to talk about how greedy the teachers are and how we want more than the government's one percent wage cap. That's because he doesn't want to draw attention to

the other more important issues like the class sizes. In my area, we haven't even had a discussion on money and Lecce won't even say his cap is negotiable. One percent, though, erodes our wages over the life of the contract."

The Ford government is effectively refusing to negotiate. ETFO and government negotiators last met on December 19, and the government has no talks scheduled with the ETFO, OECTA, or OSSTF. The only negotiating dates planned are two in the coming week with the *Association des enseignantes et des enseignants franco-ontariens*, which represents teachers at the province's French-language school boards.

Nonetheless, the government and press continue to vilify the teachers, accusing them of holding students "hostage," when they are resisting Ford's plans to ravage public education.

In a statement this week, Lecce attacked "teacher union leaders" for breaking "their promise to not adversely impact student learning by withdrawing services for our kids, including EQAO math testing, extracurriculars, and report cards." Lecce, who appears to have forgotten that the right to strike is enjoyed by all teachers, arrogantly declared in a statement. "Students deserve better, and most importantly, our government believes they deserve to be in class."

If Lecce can publicly voice such disdain for the teachers, despite the widespread public support they enjoy, it is above all due to the disastrous role being played by the teachers' unions and their allies in the Ontario Federation of Labour.

Anxious to prevent the teachers' struggle from becoming the spearhead of a working-class challenge to the Ford government, they have all scrupulously avoided talking about the threat of back-to-work legislation. This is because the teacher unions intend to docilely submit to such a flagrant attack on worker rights, and to fob off demands for action by telling teachers the only way forward is to challenge the legislation's constitutionality in the courts and vote for the Liberals or NDP, that is the Conservatives' pro-austerity establishment rivals, in 2022.

Strikers are beginning to see through this charade. The striker in Toronto told our reporter, "I was thinking about the last big strike in 2012 and how the Liberal government used back-to-work legislation against us and how the courts then ruled that law unconstitutional because it interfered with our bargaining rights. So, I asked (a union official), as if I was just floating a trial balloon, that if the courts ruled that back then, well maybe we can just ignore any new Conservative legislation because that kind of interference has already been ruled unconstitutional. He didn't like that idea and said that we couldn't do that and would have to go back to work and then go to court again."

The teacher was referring to the banning of a strike by Dalton McGuinty's Ontario Liberal government in 2012. Four years after the strike, a judge ruled that the Liberals had "substantially interfered" with teachers' bargaining rights. Nonetheless, he declined to issue any penalty or remedy

beyond advising that the unions and government could now restart discussions.

The last strike movement involving teachers on a scale similar to the current contract battle occurred in 1997 in opposition to the Tory government of Mike Harris, which like the current Ford government was tasked by big business with slashing public services and intensifying the exploitation of the working class.

The teacher in Waterloo reflected on the experience of this previous strike. "I was involved in the big two-week strike against the (Harris) government's attacks on teachers back in 1997," she said. "Then, we gave up wage increases for years in order to try to save programs like music, art and libraries. Yes, we received support from parents back then, but we are receiving even more support now because people saw that no one got anything after the end of the strike."

The challenge confronting teachers is to translate the broad popular support for their defence of public education into a mass political movement that can defeat Ford's austerity agenda, which is backed by the entire ruling elite. This requires the formation by teachers and their supporters of independent action committees to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the pro-capitalist unions. These committees must call a province-wide strike of all educators and prepare for defiance of any strike-breaking law by appealing for support from workers across the country and internationally.

Above all, they must recognize that their fight is not simply a collective bargaining dispute. Rather, it is a political struggle against the ruling elite and its capitalist system that can be successfully waged only as part of the fight for a workers' government committed to socialist policies, so that society's vast wealth can be used to meet basic social needs, including high-quality public education.

The authors also recommend:

Build rank-and-file committees to prepare a political general strike against Ontario's Doug Ford!
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