

Two hundred thousand Canadian teachers strike, as global worker counter-offensive continues

A WSWS reporting team
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Two hundred thousand Ontario teachers and school support staff joined a one-day province-wide strike Friday.

The education workers are leading opposition to the sweeping austerity measures that are being implemented by Ontario's Progressive Conservative government and its premier, the Trump admirer and multi-millionaire businessman Doug Ford.

As part of its drive to "make Ontario open for business," the Ford government is cutting almost a billion dollars per year from education spending, dramatically increasing high school class sizes, eliminating 10,000 teaching positions, and seeking to impose mandatory on-line courses.

Teachers and school support staff are also a primary target of the government's mendaciously named "Protecting a Sustainable Public Sector for Future Generations Act." Through this law, the government is imposing real wage and benefit cuts on more than a million public sector workers by legally capping their wage and benefit increases to well below the inflation rate for each of the next three years. At the same time, it is funneling still more money to the rich through corporate and income tax cuts.

Since 2018, as part of the resurgence of class struggle worldwide, a wave of teacher strikes has swept the globe. Teachers and college instructors have engaged in strike action in all six continents, from Chile and Argentina to the US, Britain, Holland, Iran and India. Teachers went on strike in Colombia's major cities Thursday and Friday to demand improved wages, health care and the government's compliance with previous agreements.

If education workers find themselves in the forefront of the opposition to austerity, it is because capitalist governments view the dismantling of public education as a key element in their evisceration of all the social rights of the working class.

As one striking Toronto teacher told the *World Socialist Web Site* yesterday, "If you can privatize education, you can privatize anything."

Many of the teacher strikes, especially in the United States, have developed in open rebellion against the pro-capitalist unions. In Santa Cruz, University of California graduate teaching assistants are currently mounting a wildcat strike in

defiance of the no-strike clause in the contract negotiated by the United Auto Workers (UAW) union.

Yesterday's walkout closed all of Ontario's 5,000 publicly funded elementary and secondary schools, impacting two million students.

There is great militancy among the teachers and educational support workers and mass popular support for their stand in defence of public education.

More than 30,000 teachers and their supporters rallied yesterday outside Queen's Park, the provincial legislature in downtown Toronto. An estimated 20,000 more held a mass picket along a kilometers-long stretch of highway in Toronto's sprawling Peel County suburbs, and 10,000 rallied in Kitchener-Waterloo, a regional center in southwestern Ontario.

Many teachers brought hand-made signs that expressed their anger with the government and pointed to the devastating impact of the cuts and their blatant class character. Diana, a French-language immersion school teacher, told the WSWS, "The slogan on the Ontario license plate says, 'A place to grow.' But it's only a place to grow for those with money. Ford is cutting public education because they want to control poor people by keeping our kids ignorant."

Teachers who spoke with WSWS reporters at the Toronto rally expressed great interest in and solidarity with the struggles of teachers around the world to defend public education. Groups of teachers could be heard singing "We're not gonna take it," one of the main protest songs sung by West Virginia teachers during their 2018 wildcat strike.

But as in the United States and other countries, the four Ontario teacher and support staff unions are doing everything they can to contain, defuse and sabotage the struggle. Although the education workers' contracts expired at the end of August, or nearly six months ago, this was the first joint action called by the four unions.

The education unions, which are working in close partnership with the Ontario Federation of Labour, have made no call for a joint struggle to the hundreds of thousands of other public sector workers who are victims of the Conservatives' budget cuts and their wage-cutting Bill 124.

Above all, the unions and their allies in the social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP) are determined to smother the teachers and support staff workers' struggle because they fear it could rapidly escape their political control and become the catalyst for a mass working class challenge to the hated Ford government and the austerity agenda of the entire Canadian ruling class.

Ford and Ontario Education Minister Stephen Lecce have repeatedly threatened to criminalize all job action by teachers and support staff and impose their cuts by government decree. For weeks, their standard refrain has been "there is still time for a negotiated agreement." Yesterday, Ford stepped up the Conservatives' and corporate media's smear campaign, accusing teachers of taking children "hostage" for resisting the assault on public education and declaring the strike "unacceptable."

The unions have maintained a radio silence on the government's plans to bludgeon teachers and support staff back to work with an anti-strike law and the threat of punitive fines, police action and more. This is because they intend to invoke the government's criminalization of the teacher and support-staff workers' struggle as the pretext for shutting it down, just as unions across Canada have done for decades.

As around the world, Canada's unions and "left" NDP politicians have systematically suppressed the class struggle and openly supported the capitalist elite in imposing its agenda of austerity, attacks on democratic rights, militarism and war. In the name of blocking the hard-right Conservatives from power, the unions for 15 years supported Liberal governments in Ontario that slashed social spending, illegalized teacher job action, and cut taxes for big business and the rich.

Today the unions and the NDP are propping up Canada's Justin Trudeau minority Liberal government. Behind phony progressive rhetoric, Trudeau is slashing tens of billions from health care to buy fleets of new warships and fighter jets, and implicating Canada every more deeply in Washington's reckless and incendiary military-strategic offensives against China and Russia and its regime-change intrigues in Latin America.

Teachers were highly responsive to the call for a political general strike to bring down the Ford government and initiate the independent political mobilization of the working class across Canada in the fight for workers' power that was elaborated in a Socialist Equality Party (Canada) statement (See: "Ontario teachers require a socialist program to defeat austerity, defend public education").

Emphasizing that one of the defining elements of the global working class counter-offensive is that it is developing largely outside and increasingly in explicit rebellion against the pro-capitalist trade unions, the statement explained that if they are to prevail in their struggle, teachers and support staff must take control into their own hands, by forming action committees entirely independent of, and in political opposition to, the union

apparatuses.

Sonia, a high school teacher, told the WSW, "All public sector workers need to unite. The only public employees Ford is backing is the police. There are sinister reasons for this. So far, these protests have been peaceful and lighthearted, but there is a potential that things could become more tense. We saw it with [federal Conservative leader] Andrew Scheer, who said the RCMP [Royal Canadian Mounted Police] should be sent against the [indigenous] Wet'suwet'en protesters blocking the rail lines. In the US, Trump says he has the police, the border patrol and law enforcement on his side. Ford wants to do the same."

Rob, a high school teacher who spoke with a WSW reporter at the Kitchener-Waterloo rally, discussed the government threat to legislate an end to the teachers' struggle. "I haven't talked with many teachers about what we would do or should do if Ford ordered us back to work. And I didn't hear anything from the speeches today up on the stage about it. They told us that we do such a great job as educators. Sure, that's true. They said how hard we work. True again. But I was expecting to hear something about what we do next. Other than a couple who mentioned not voting for Ford in two years, I didn't hear anything. I want to know what we do next, not what might happen in a couple of years."

Paul, a retired teacher with 30 years in the Toronto school district, said, "If you downgrade education, you downgrade democracy. They are dis-empowering the working class. Trump reminds me of fascists in Germany, diverting anger towards immigrants, and Ford is nothing but the Trump of the North. We have to stop them because every child deserves to have an education and a good future."



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