

After walkout of 200,000 teachers and support staff

Ontario's education unions “suspend” most job actions

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27 February 2020

In the wake of last Friday's powerful one-day walkout of 200,000 Ontario teachers and support staff, the province's education unions have moved to shut down future job actions and divide workers along sectional lines.

Terrified by the mass mobilization of education workers and the broad support they enjoy within the population, the unions' have renewed their efforts to reach a “compromise” with Trump wannabe Doug Ford and his hard-right Tory government—that is to derail the fight against austerity and impose concession-laden agreements.

In a cynical maneuver aimed at disguising that it is demobilizing teachers, the 83,000-member Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO) released a statement Monday that sought to give the impression it was expanding the struggle. The union is “moving to Phase 6” of its strike plan, proclaimed the statement. But it then went on to explain that under “Phase 6” the ETFO—which had been holding a day of province-wide strike and a day of rotating regional walkouts each week since the beginning of February—is suspending all job action until at least March 9.

Similarly, citing the prospect of fresh talks with the government, the Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association (OECTA) has announced the cancellation of previously-announced regional rotating strikes this week at dozens of school boards across the province. The sole pretext for this move was a worthless assurance from the mediator that “meaningful” discussions will take place between the OECTA and the government.

Not to be outdone in the speed of their sabotage of the growing movement for an all-out strike, the

Association des enseignantes et des enseignants ontariens, which represents the 12,000 teachers at the province's French-language school boards, announced Tuesday the cancellation of a province-wide strike planned for today. In a province where long winters and sub-zero temperatures are an annual occurrence, the union sought to justify its move by citing a forecast of “inclement weather” Thursday. However, it does not appear that the expected snowfall will stop the resumption of the union's talks with the Ford government tomorrow.

The Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF) is the only union continuing any job action. It will hold regional rotating strikes at a number of school boards tomorrow, including in Hamilton and Ottawa. However, the union has declared that it is ready to suspend all future strikes if the government agrees to stick by the same class sizes and school funding that existed for the 2018-19 education year. This means the OSSTF is preparing to accept the horrendous conditions that prevail in Ontario's schools as the result of a decade of Liberal-imposed austerity, and to capitulate to the Ford government's demand for further cuts in teachers' real wages.

In November, the Tories adopted legislation, Bill 124, that caps wage and benefit increases for 1 million public sector workers, including teachers and school support staff, to 1 percent per annum—or far below the inflation rate—for each of the next three years.

Last October, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) hailed as a “victory” contracts that it negotiated along the lines now being suggested by the OSSTF on behalf of more than 50,000 Ontario school support staff.

The record of the teachers' unions and the union bureaucracy as a whole in Ontario shows that their de-escalation of the teachers' struggle is not a question of misguided tactics.

In the year and a half since Doug Ford came to power, the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) and its affiliated unions have striven to suppress working class opposition to capitalist austerity. The OFL has focused its attention on its bogus "Power of Many" campaign, the goal of which is summed up by the countdown clock on its website telling visitors to wait over 800 days for the privilege of electing a "progressive" government in 2022, i.e., a right-wing, pro-austerity government led by the Liberals or NDP.

For their part, the teachers unions, in the six months since contracts expired, have each pursued their own independent negotiation strategy and job actions, even though the fundamental issues confronting all teachers are the same. They have made no appeal for a joint struggle to hospital workers, college lecturers, civil servants and hundreds of thousands of other workers whose incomes and benefits are likewise threatened by Bill 124.

They have also said nothing about the looming danger the government will outlaw all teacher job action by adopting an emergency strike-breaking law, even though Ford and his hatchet-man, Education Minister Stephen Lecce, have repeatedly threatened to do so.

The unions' determination to demobilize the education workers exposes the utterly hollow and cynical character of the threats various OFL leaders made last weekend of a "general strike." OFL President Patty Coates, herself a former long-standing OSSTF official during the years of union-backed Liberal austerity, bombastically told a protest gathering outside the Progressive Conservatives' policy convention in Niagara Falls, "If the Conservatives don't listen to us, if they don't hear the people of Ontario say 'enough is enough,' we will shut this province down."

This is all hot air. The only "mobilization" such union bureaucrats will organize will be a get-out-the-vote campaign for the big business Liberals or NDP in two years' time. However, Coates feels compelled to engage in such demagoguery because she fears that the union bureaucracy could lose control of the growing

opposition to capitalist austerity among working people.

As the Socialist Equality Party (Canada) statement that was distributed at Friday's rally of 30,000 teachers in Toronto explains, "One of the essential characteristics of the global working-class counter-offensive—from the Yellow Vest movement in France and the wildcat strikes of the Matamoros autoworkers in Mexico to the US teacher strikes—is that it has developed outside and increasingly in conscious opposition to the corporatist unions and establishment 'left' parties."

Stressing that teachers and their supporters must see their struggles as part of an international counter-offensive by the working class against capitalist austerity and war, it continued: "Teachers and other workers need new organizations of struggle. Action committees, entirely independent of the unions, must be built to systematically mobilize the working class against the wide array of anti-working class measures introduced by Ford, prepare a general strike and defiance of any anti-strike law, and reach out to workers across Canada, in the US, Mexico and beyond."

The latest actions of the education unions show that this task is posed more urgently than ever. If workers do not take the conduct of their struggle into their own hands, the unions will shut it down and sell it out, notwithstanding teachers and school support-staff workers' militancy and determination to fight.



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