Citing COVID-19 crisis, Ontario teacher unions impose concession-filled contracts

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Seizing on the COVID-19 pandemic as a pretext, all four unions that represent Ontario public school teachers have struck sellout three-year contract deals with the provincial Conservative government.

The agreements constitute a flagrant betrayal of the 200,000 elementary and high school teachers, who waged a months-long struggle—including the largest teacher job action in twenty years—against the hard-right, Doug Ford-led government and its assault on education and other essential public services.

After months of delayed and stalled talks with the province, the unions shamelessly rolled over and abandoned most of the teachers' central demands.

Consequently, in each of the next three years, teachers will suffer a further cut in their real wages. And despite the unions' vows to resist Ford's cuts, the new agreements enshrine increased class sizes and a raft of other cuts that will accelerate the decline of an already chronically underfunded public education system.

The first agreement was reached on March 12 by the 45,000-member Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA), following months of discussions and a series of four one-day strikes. On March 20, after a months-long work-to-rule campaign and a series of rotating strikes and one-day province-wide walkouts, Ontario's largest teachers' union, the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO), reached a tentative agreement, since ratified by a large majority.

The *Association des enseignantes et des enseignants franco-ontariens* (AEFO), which represent teachers at the province's French school boards announced their tentative deal on March 31. On April 20, the last of the four unions, the 60,000-member Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF), announced its own agreement with the province.

All of the new contracts limit salary increases to just 1 percent a year for the next three years, which is substantially less than the current and projected inflation rate. These real-term pay cuts are in line with the wage caps imposed by the Ford government on over 1 million public sector workers under Bill 124.

The agreements allow the unions to continue pursuing a constitutional challenge, backed by the Ontario Federation of Labour, to Bill 124. Such challenges have been used time and again by the trade unions as a cover for their suppression of strikes and working class resistance, and acceptance of employer concession demands.

The unions' miserable climb down on the wage issue underscores the fraudulent character of their professed opposition to Ford's cuts. Only a few months ago, OSSTF president Harvey Bischof and other union leaders denounced the Tory government publicly in militant tones for suspending "collective bargaining" to impose its wage cap. Now, they have all accepted it without batting an eyelid.

All four teachers' contracts are in the same mould as that the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) reached with the Ford government at the eleventh-hour last October, torpedoing a planned strike by 55,000 school support staff. In return for the Ford government moderating some of its concession demands and rolling back some of its budget cuts, CUPE, like the teachers unions, agreed to impose the wage-cap and abandoned opposition to the remainder of the government's budget cuts and contract rollbacks.

CUPE's betrayal signalled that Ontario's education unions would each pursue their own negotiating strategy and steadfastly resist any attempt to unite all teachers and support staff in a common struggle.

While the details differ, all four teacher unions have accepted increased workloads for teachers.

Under the OSSTF deal, an increase in the average high school class size from 22 to 23 that was introduced for the 2019-20 school year now becomes permanent.

At the elementary level, the new contracts maintain the full-day kindergarten program with one teacher and one early childhood educator per classroom, but average class sizes for grades 4-8 are to be increased by one student.

The Ford government pushed for the introduction of four mandatory high school e-learning courses, with the double

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aim of using e-learning as a means to increase class sizes and create an entry point for private education providers. Ultimately, it scaled this back to two e-courses and agreed that students will be allowed to opt out, but only after consulting with a school counsellor.

This "compromise" will not stop the government from continuing to aggressively push for the expansion of e-learning, especially now that online mechanisms have been widely used to provide teacher instruction and support during the COVID-19 school closures.

At least some of the teacher agreements also give school authorities broader leeway in ignoring accrued seniority in hiring new permanent teachers.

Whatever new programs and funding schemes the Ford government is peddling to educators and parents, such as the creation of a Support for Students fund meant to fund 434 special education teaching positions in elementary schools, these in no way make up for the thousands of education jobs that have been or will be lost as a result of the cuts carried out since the Ford government came to power on June 2017 and the new larger class-sizes.

Per pupil funding has and will continue to go down, as the government is determined to limit increases in education spending to around 1 percent per year. This is well below the 2.7 percent that is needed to cover inflation and rising enrollment, let alone address the growing backlog of school maintenance and repairs that has ballooned to over $16 billion.

Some of the "restored' funding being touted by the unions may prove to be smoke and mirrors, with the government using the COVID-19 pandemic to renege on its promises. Significantly, the government has yet to release the $78 million to rehire 1,300 school support staff that it pledged as part of its negotiations with CUPE last October.

Teachers and parents have shown no shortage of militancy in fighting to defend public education. On February 21, 200,000 Ontario teachers and support staff staged a powerful one-day province-wide walkout—the largest teacher job action since a 1997 "illegal" strike that erupted as part of the working-class upsurge against the Mike Harris Tory government and its Thatcherite "Common Sense Revolution."

On the whole, the teachers' protests and walkouts were warmly supported by the working class, with large majorities of Ontarians regularly stating in opinion polls that they backed the teachers' demand for no cuts. However, as the *World Socialist Web Site* warned at the time of the Feb. 21 strike, absent an intervention by rank-and-file teachers to take the struggle into their own hands and mobilize the entire working class against austerity and to bring down the Ford government, the pro-capitalist unions would shut the struggle down.

The teachers' unions did just that. In the days immediately following the Feb. 21 walkout, they cancelled all planned walkouts, then subsequently used the coronavirus pandemic to indefinitely suspend all job action, before accepting and pushing through concessions-laden contracts.

In announcing his union's tentative agreement with the Ford government, OSSTF President Harvey Bischof tried to justify the union's abandonment of key teacher demands by pointing to the "extraordinary times." "While this tentative agreement does not satisfy all of our concerns," declared Bischof in a news release, "we recognize the current environment we are in and the need for students to have stability once this emergency is over."

Bischof and his fellow union bureaucrats made no attempt to explain how "stability" can be created through yet more funding cuts and wage reductions in an education system that is already hopelessly underfunded after decades of Liberal, NDP and Tory-imposed austerity.

Ford was forced onto the back foot during the militant job action initiated by teachers. But the unions' sellout agreements have strengthened his hand, including in pushing for a premature return to work. On Monday, as deaths from COVID-19 in the province topped 900 and infections continued to tear through long-term care homes across Ontario and Quebec, Ford unveiled a reckless "three-stage approach" for restarting the economy. If Ford's back-to-work drive appears on the surface to be at a somewhat slower tempo than that of his neighbour to the east, Quebec Premier Francois Legault, this is only because Ford allowed much larger swathes of the economy, including virtually all manufacturing, to remain open throughout the crisis by declaring them "essential services."

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