

Ontario teachers union leader emphatically opposes job action to stop reckless school reopening

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In an interview with Toronto-based CP24 television last week, the head of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF), Harvey Bischof, admitted that the government-big business drive to reopen schools amid the COVID-19 pandemic is endangering teachers' health and even lives.

He pointed to the lack of social distancing measures, the Ontario Conservative government's refusal to reduce class sizes, and the failure of the government and school boards to provide teachers with the necessary personal protective equipment (PPE) to substantiate this assessment.

Yet when Bischof was asked what the trade unions intend to do about these life-threatening work conditions, his answer was unequivocal. "If the question is whether we are planning some illegal job action, the answer is a flat out no," he asserted.

In other words, the OSSTF intends to join the hard-right Doug Ford-led government in corraling teachers into the province's schools when they reopen this week, and it will insist they remain on the job as their colleagues, students, and parents inevitably fall sick to the virus. More than 80 Quebec schools have reported at least one COVID-19 case since they began reopening two weeks ago.

Moreover, in Ontario, as in most parts of the country outside the Atlantic provinces, COVID-19 cases are rising sharply. On Saturday, Ontario reported 169 new cases, its highest tally since July, and nationally new cases are averaging more than 500 per day, twice the number in mid-July. Most worryingly, due to the lack of proper contact-tracing and systematic testing, health authorities have little idea as to how the disease is being transmitted.

In Canada as around the world, teachers and school support staff are on the front lines of the fight against the homicidal policy of reopening the economy amid a raging pandemic, regardless of the cost in human life. This policy is supported by the entire ruling elite. The federal Liberal government led by Justin Trudeau has spearheaded the back-

to-work campaign and provided crucial political and financial support to allow Ford and other hard-right premiers to put the lives of teachers, students, and parents at risk by returning them to overcrowded and under-resourced classrooms.

Reopening the schools is seen as essential by big business, because it means that they can compel parents to return to their jobs and resume producing profits for the corporate elite.

The OSSTF president's remarks speak volumes about the function of the procapitalist trade unions and their relationship to the workers they purport to represent. For the well-heeled bureaucrats who staff the union apparatuses, loyalty to the capitalist state and its anti-worker collective bargaining system is far more important than their members' health and lives.

Bischof's contemptuous dismissal of "illegal job action" is no different than the United Food and Commercial Workers' rejection of "illegal strikes" as it ordered 2,000 meatpacking workers back on the job at Cargill's High River plant in Alberta last spring. The deaths of at least three people were tied to the COVID-19 outbreak at that facility, where over 1,000 workers were infected.

Rather than organize a struggle to protect the lives of teachers, students, and parents, the OSSTF and the other teacher unions are directing their energies at working to prevent popular opposition to the reckless back-to-school drive from breaking out of the stultifying framework of establishment politics.

At the outset, the OSSTF, *Association des enseignantes et des enseignants franco-ontariens* (AEFO), the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO), and the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA) offered to work with Ford in fashioning the government's back-to-school plan. They pursued this strategy even though it was clear Ford, whose government has cut billions from social spending, had no intention of taking substantive measures to

prevent the virus from running rampant in schools. Instead the right-wing populist premier has railed against the unions for urging even the most elementary protective measures, such as reduced class sizes and clear standards regarding proper ventilation, student cohorting, and physical distancing on school grounds and in school buses.

In a bid to contain the mounting public anger towards the Ford government, the four unions made a public show of breaking off talks last week and denounced Ford for failing to cooperate in good faith. The OSSTF, ETFO, OECTA, and AEFO subsequently made a joint complaint to the Ontario Labour Relations Board (OLRB) accusing the government of violating the Ontario Health and Safety Act.

In a joint statement published August 31, the unions wrote that “the Ministry of Education’s ‘Guide to Re-opening Ontario’s Schools’ does not take every reasonable precaution to protect workers, as required by Section 25(2)(h) of the Occupational Health and Safety Act.”

Teachers and their supporters must recognize the unions’ appeal to the OLRB for what it is: a transparent fraud. The OLRB is a pro-employer arm of the provincial government that to date has upheld just one out of more than 300 worker COVID-19 related complaints.

Moreover, with over two million students and 190,000 teachers scheduled to return to school in the coming days, it seems increasingly likely that the OLRB will not even issue a ruling on the unions’ complaint until teachers and students have returned to packed classrooms, thus putting them at risk of infection and death.

Anyone harbouring illusions about the possibility of the OLRB enforcing adequate health and safety measures should consider its long history of imposing the anti-worker dictates of big business and the ruling class. In 2015, the current chair of the OLRB, Bernard Fishbein, declared the job action by teachers in Durham and Peel counties illegal. Fishbein was also instrumental in outlawing job actions against GM’s shuttering of its Oshawa assembly plant in 2019.

The teacher unions’ support for this anti-worker institution is of a piece with their transformation over decades into appendages of the capitalist state tasked with enforcing austerity and smothering opposition among educators. During their 15-year-long collaboration with successive Liberal provincial governments from 2003-18, the unions imposed “net zero” pay settlements on teachers and connived in the imposition of austerity budgets that drove up class sizes and starved teachers and students of resources.

After teacher opposition to Ford’s intensification of this austerity drive forced them to call a one-day provincewide strike last February, the unions moved quickly to end all further job actions and to agree to concessions-laden contracts, including a further increase in class sizes (see:

“Citing COVID-19 crisis, Ontario teacher unions impose concession filled contracts”).

If the spread of the virus is to be stemmed and the reckless back-to-school drive halted, it is paramount that teachers form independent rank-and-file safety committees to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the unions. Teachers and students in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany have already taken a courageous stand by forming independent committees.

These committees must fight for the immediate closure of the schools until the pandemic is under control and prepare job actions to protect the health and lives of teachers, students and parents. They should take up the call for a massive increase in public funding for schools to cover the costs of ensuring stable and reliable distance education for all, as well as an array of support services, including for mental health, special education, and food security.

The ruling elite will inevitably claim that there is “no money” to implement these demands. The reality is society has ample resources, but they are monopolized by the capitalist elite. A recent Parliamentary Budget Office study found that the richest one percent of Canadians own about as much as the poorest 80 percent.

We strongly encourage all educators, students, parents, and family members in Ontario and across Canada who agree with this program to attend the next online call-in meeting of the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee. It will be held at 3 p.m. Eastern time on Saturday, September 12.

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