Teachers at Toronto school walk off the job after COVID-19 outbreak

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Teachers and support staff at Glamorgan Junior Public School, in the Toronto borough of Scarborough, walked off the job Monday to protest school authorities' decision to keep the school open despite a major COVID-19 outbreak. The outbreak was declared last Friday after nine teachers and two students tested positive for the potentially lethal virus. Fifty-eight students have been ordered to quarantine.

The work stoppage continued yesterday as reports emerged of a further student testing positive. The Toronto District School Board (TDSB) has flatly refused to close the school, citing an inspection carried out last week by the Ontario Ministry of Labour and the opinion of Toronto Public Health that the building is safe. The authorities have sought to justify this with claims that the coronavirus infections have been confined to one wing of the school.

These claims are nothing more than self-serving justifications for the murderous "herd immunity" policy being pursued by Ontario's Doug Ford-led hard-right Conservative government. Ford, the federal Liberal government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, and the entire ruling elite are determined to keep schools open so that parents can be forced back to work to produce profits for big business.

Since schools reopened in Ontario in September, over 2,300 infections have been recorded among teachers, students and school support staff. In Quebec, there were 422 new COVID-19 cases among elementary and high school students and staff just on November 2, bringing the total there to 7,444.

In an anonymous statement sent by the protesting Glamorgan JPS teachers to local news channel CP 24 Monday, the educators rejected the school board's assertions. They noted that members of staff from the wing of the building where the infections occurred routinely enter and move around other parts of the school, meaning everyone is at risk of infection. The statement also noted that the teachers had demanded the closure of the school or additional safety protocols, but the principal and TDSB refused to take any action.

The job action at Glamorgan JPS is being followed closely by teachers across Canada, many of whom recognize that the horrendous working conditions there are being replicated in educational facilities across the country.

In comments to the *World Socialist Web Site*, a secondary school teacher from Hamilton expressed his support for the teachers' job action. "This news is very disconcerting. I've been teaching for over 20 years, and I've never seen anything like this," he said, referring to the spread of the virus. "I wholeheartedly support the job action taken by these courageous educators and support staff at Glamorgan Junior Public School. Unfortunately, I do not believe that they will be supported by the Ontario Labour Relations Board, who very rarely rule in favour of the employee over the employer. My colleagues and I are watching developments very closely and we are wondering what comes next. At the same time, our union remains very quiet. It's as if the school boards and our union are keeping us in the dark."

Fearing that the job action at Glamorgan JPS could set an example teachers at other schools will follow, the government quickly dispatched Ministry of Labour officials to the school Monday. They are reportedly conducting an investigation to determine whether the work refusal was justified under Ontario labour law, which formally acknowledges workers' right to refuse unsafe work. That this inquiry will ignore the workers' just concerns, however, is an all but a foregone conclusion. Since the onset of the pandemic, the Ministry has tossed out almost all of the several thousand COVID-19 workplace complaints

The education unions responded to the Glamorgan JPS walkout by rushing to seize control of it. They claimed to support workers exercising their right to refuse unsafe work, but urged teachers and support staff to place their faith in the Ford government's anti-worker Labour Ministry.

The main concern of the four Ontario teachers' unions and the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), which represents support staff, is to prevent the teachers' walkout from becoming the catalyst for a much broader struggle

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against the homicidal policy of reopening all schools for in-person learning amid a raging pandemic. As Don MacMillan, spokesman for the Toronto Education Workers (CUPE Local 4400), put it, “We’re all looking for common ground here, so we can get staff back in schools.”

Elementary Teachers of Toronto President Jennifer Brown sought to downplay the significance of the job action, declaring, “Because this is an individual work refusal what the teachers do will depend on what they hear as a response from the Ministry of Labour to their direct concerns.”

These statements underscore the trade union officialdom’s indifference to the health and safety of the teachers and education staff they purport to represent. The unions worked hand-in-glove with the Ford government to ensure that schools were reopened for in-class teaching in September under totally unsafe conditions and in the face of widespread concerns from teachers, parents and students.

Even now, when teachers have been forced to walk out due to an immediate threat to their well-being posed by a COVID-19 outbreak, the unions’ main concerns are that the protest is brought to a conclusion as swiftly as possible, so it not serve as an example to other workers, and that it remain confined within the province’s pro-employer, state-regulated labour relations system.

It must be stated bluntly that if the struggle against unsafe schools does not spread beyond “individual work refusals” it will fail. That teachers and support staff find themselves in this position is the outcome of the unions’ repeated suppression of teachers’ opposition to the Ford government’s attacks on education and its reckless back-to-work, back-to-school drive. In early September Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation (OSSTF) President Harvey Bischof categorically opposed teachers taking strike action to oppose unsafe working conditions and protect their health and that of their students and families, declaring such action “illegal.”

Instead, to head off mounting opposition to the resumption of in-person learning, Bischof’s OSSTF, together with the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario, Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association and the *Association des enseignantes et des enseignants Ontariens*, filed a complaint with the pro-employer Ontario Labour Relations Board (OLRB) over the planned reopening of schools. When the OLRB threw out the case four weeks later on a technicality and without even bothering to consider its merits, the teachers’ unions proclaimed with one voice that nothing more could be done, and that teachers would have to file “individual” class-by-class complaints, as the OLRB stipulated, when circumstances required.

The experience of teachers in Ontario is the same as that of educators in Quebec, British Columbia, the United States and Europe. In every country, capitalist governments, irrespective of their political stripe, have recklessly reopened schools with total disregard for the lives of teachers, students and their families. In Canada, the Trudeau-led federal Liberal government has supported the right-wing populist Tory Doug Ford, the hard-right Coalition Avenir Quebec Premier Francois Legault and the New Democrat John Horgan in forcing students and teachers back into overcrowded classrooms. The trade unions are everywhere complicit in this policy, having cooperated with government authorities to draft back-to-school plans and blocked efforts by teachers and parents to oppose them.

The only way the teachers and education support staff at Glamorgan Junior Public School can protect their health and lives amid the pandemic is by appealing for support from teachers throughout Ontario and across Canada to take up a political fight against the ruling elite’s prioritization of corporate profits over the lives of teachers, students and their families.

To wage this struggle, teachers and support staff must establish rank-and-file safety committees independently of and in opposition to the pro-capitalist trade unions in every school and neighbourhood. These committees should prepare a general strike to halt in-person learning until the pandemic is brought under control, demand billions to strengthen the education system and provide high-quality online learning, and fight for full wage compensation for all parents who have to remain at home to care for their children.

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