

Ontario teacher denounces unions' "feckless response" to government's ruinous handling of the pandemic

A letter from an Ontario teacher
17 January 2021

Like its counterparts in every province across Canada, Ontario's Doug Ford-led Conservative government is doing everything it can to keep schools open as the COVID-19 pandemic rages out of control.

Despite widespread demands by public health experts, teachers and parents to close schools as infections surged in November and December, the Ford government insisted on keeping them open. Finally, confronting the imminent threat of the collapse of the health care system, Ford decided to delay the reopening of schools following the holiday break.

Special needs students returned to class on January 4 and 11, and elementary school students in the province's northern regions returned January 11. Areas of the province with high rates of infection are being ordered to resume in-person learning on January 25 and February 10.

This homicidal policy is putting the lives of educators, students and their families at risk. Under conditions in which the province's intensive care units are overflowing with COVID-19 patients, the increase in infections that will inevitably result from reopening schools will lead to mass death. This is of no concern to the political establishment, whose overriding priority is to return students to the classroom so that parents can go back to work to generate profits for big business.

The World Socialist Web Site recently received a letter from a secondary school teacher from Hamilton, Ontario, who described the ruinous impact of the government's handling of the pandemic and the teacher unions' feckless response. The letter was prompted by Premier Doug Ford's December 22 proposal for secondary schools to shift to online learning throughout January.

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A familiar pattern has developed between the pro-austerity/education-attacking Ontario government on the one hand, and the feckless union leadership of the OSSTF (Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation) on the other. The former changes the working conditions for tens of thousands of educators seemingly on a whim and without any thought or consultations, while the latter follows up with empty rhetoric that only highlights the union's impotence and abject failure to protect workers from a constant barrage of cuts and changes to working conditions.

In the end, classroom teachers have been left to deal with the fallout with no help or support either from the Ontario government, or their unions. The result is a demoralized, isolated and exhausted education sector. The disrespect towards educators comes from both directions it seems.

The December 22 OSSTF statement on the shutdown of schools illustrates this pattern all too clearly. "Although the Ford government is appropriately providing emergency childcare for many essential frontline workers, it has left educators out in the cold. While educators are clearly providing a critical service to the province, and while (Education) Minister Lecce has imposed various stipulations on the amount of time they must spend providing live, synchronous instruction, no thought appears to have been given to those teachers and education workers who have their own children at home during the school closure period. This simply continues a pattern of disrespect for educators that we have seen since this government took office. Despite the government's disregard for the realities of the classroom, and despite giving teachers

and education workers virtually no time to prepare for this shift to full virtual education, our members will continue to do their utmost to provide the best learning environment possible for the students they serve,” the union wrote.

Translation for Ontario’s high school teachers: The right-wing Conservative government of Doug Ford is going to change your working conditions yet again, and the OSSTF leadership is not going to do anything about it. You will just have to do your best. For special education teachers the situation is even more tenuous. Responding to OSSTF President Harvey Bischof’s December 22 tweet, a special education teacher asked, “How are special education classes still required to be open in a full province lockdown and especially with the close contacts in this setting? This seems like a serious equity and safety issue.”

A response to this question has not yet been issued.

Perhaps what is most shocking is how little pushback the union has given in the face of the Ford government’s relentless attacks on public education since the beginning of the pandemic response. In union meeting after union meeting at the branch level since the start of the school year in September, there has been a dearth of information for the union membership of OSSTF on constantly changing work conditions. No one knows anything. We are always waiting for information. One minute we are teaching online, the next we shift to a hybrid model. Then another Doug Ford diktat comes down telling us we are going to teach live in class to students and to an online audience **AT THE SAME TIME!!!** And where is our union? Literally silent on the matter. We have entered a madhouse where educators constantly must change delivery methods with no thought of how we are supposed to do this. Education in Ontario has turned into a three-ring circus with the Ontario Government and the OSSTF telling teachers to walk the high-wire one minute, and the flying trapeze the next—with no safety net below us!

I have been an educator in Ontario for over twenty years. As the year 2020 ends, the state of education in Ontario is not good. COVID-19 has made my workplace unrecognizable from how it was even a year ago. Teachers are feeling like a giant bobo doll, constantly being knocked around by the Ford government, and getting nothing but hollow rhetoric,

positive psychology, and empty platitudes from the OSSTF. “We are adaptable. We are resilient. We are all in this together,” we are told. Empirical evidence suggests otherwise. What is emerging among educators, not just in Ontario or Canada but throughout the world, is the realization that educators must rely on our biggest asset and resource—that is ourselves!

Harvey Bischof is correct. Frontline education workers are not respected. But that lack of respect comes from our own union leadership that has been as derelict in its advocacy for its own membership as the Conservative Government has been malicious. The development of rank-and-file teacher committees organized by teachers independent of our union leadership will become a necessity in getting the respect that educators deserve. OSSTF is on notice.



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