

Staff at Toronto school walk off the job due to COVID-19 safety concerns

Alexandra Greene
28 January 2021

Twenty-two educational assistants and support staff employed at Toronto's Beverley Public School have walked off the job due to unsafe conditions amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Since January 25, the workers have exercised their right under Ontario labour law to refuse to perform unsafe work, according to a letter sent to parents by the Toronto District School Board.

Beverley School has had five confirmed COVID-19 cases to date, one involving a student, one involving a staff member and three involving school bus drivers.

The website of the downtown Toronto school notes it is a facility with "intensive special education programming." Parents, teachers and staff alike state that the pupils who are attending in-person learning, many of whom have disabilities and additional support needs, must continue to do so, as it is crucial to their cognitive and social development and emotional well-being.

Many of the students have compromised immune systems. The staff members who work closely with them are concerned not just for their own safety at work, but for the safety of the children as well.

Under conditions where Canada is in the midst of a second wave of the pandemic far larger and more deadly than the first, all educators are at serious risk of contracting COVID-19. The Beverley Public School education assistants (EAs) face extra challenges due to the nature of their work. Special needs students are often totally unable to physically distance or wear masks, and the needs staff must attend to can be complex and contact-intensive. They include, among other tasks, feeding and toileting.

This makes it all the more scandalous that Ontario's Conservative government has done next to nothing to protect these workers. Beverley and other special needs schools have been left to operate as normal even as

COVID-19 infections surge, forcing Ontario Premier Doug Ford and Education Minister Stephen Lecce to grudgingly suspend elementary and secondary school in-person learning across wide swathes of the province.

The stand taken by the Beverley Public School staff is an expression of an upsurge of anger among educators internationally at the criminal disregard for their lives and those of their students shown by capitalist elites and their governments the world over. In Chicago, teachers are resisting threats and intimidation from the Democratic Party-led city administration to force them back into the classroom, a demand backed by US President Joe Biden and his administration. In Germany, groups of students and educators are raising the demand for a Europe-wide general strike to close schools and save lives.

A major concern for the support staff at Beverley and in other special needs schooling environments is that students often remove workers' masks and face shields. Workers who have spoken out about the issue stress that in pointing to these risks they are not blaming the children. Instead, they stress that chronic understaffing results in EAs being overwhelmed when attempting to simultaneously meet the needs of students and keep safety measures in place.

Another issue is that PPE (personal protective equipment) gets contaminated very quickly in these work environments, and workers are not being provided with sufficient PPE to protect themselves and their students. Nor are educational assistants and support staff being paid any additional wage, despite working during surging case numbers that have resulted in the suspension of most in-person learning in schools in the Greater Toronto Area until February 10.

The EAs at Beverley are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 4400. As is

always the case when a workers' struggle erupts, the union is doing all it can to isolate and contain it within the reactionary framework of the province's anti-worker labour relations system. CUPE has not even appealed to teachers at the same school, never mind EAs and teachers across the province, to join the struggle. On the contrary, the union is ordering the EAs to confine their protest to a work refusal, which is a specific procedure whereby the Labour Ministry sends an inspector to examine the workers' complaints.

In other words, the workers are being told to sit tight until a Ford government official reviews their case. Unless challenged, this is a strategy that will inevitably condemn the EAs' courageous struggle to defeat.

Ontario's education unions have deployed this policy on every occasion that a walkout has taken place since schools were reopened in the fall, with predictably disastrous results. Despite walkouts by teachers at other Toronto area schools, including Thorncliffe Park Public School in East York and Glamorgan Junior Public School in Scarborough, the unions' actions left the decision as to when and under what conditions the facilities would be reopened in the hands of the Ford government and school board officials.

With the unions' support, Ford and his hated Education Minister Stephen Lecce are working tirelessly to reopen all schools as soon as possible in order to free up parents from childcare responsibilities so they can return to their jobs and churn out profits for big business.

These policies have already had deadly consequences. Ingrid Salt, a Toronto child and youth worker represented by CUPE, became the first school worker to die from COVID-19 in Ontario in November. The WSWs reported last fall on the public anger in response to the tragedy of Salt's death, one which came as a direct result of the homicidal back-to-work and back-to-school policy enforced by governments and supported by the trade unions.

The teacher unions' refusal to support the stand taken by the education assistants at Beverley Public School is provoking anger among teachers. A secondary school teacher in the York Region told the WSWs, "To me they are the canary in the coal mine. Do we not understand what awaits us all as the provincial government pushes everyone back to work under unsafe conditions? Where are the unions? What are the

ETFO, OECTA, and OSSTF, and all the other unions waiting for? Where is the leadership? This development at Beverley is making crystal clear that teachers are at some point going to have to close ranks and start supporting each other. It's as if our leaders are stifling teacher solidarity and working with the government to get us back to work so businesses can resume making profits."

The Socialist Equality Party calls for an immediate end to in-person teaching for the duration of the pandemic to ensure the safety of students, teachers and school staff and their families.

In the case of students such as those at Beverley Public School who are faced with unique educational needs that impede their ability to learn at a distance, support for educational assistants should take the form of higher pay, access to vaccinations, and adequate PPE due to the additional risk they are placing themselves in. Vast resources should be invested in education to hire more staff and requisition buildings so students with special needs can be attended to in smaller groups.

To support both staff and families, the delivery of service should be individualistic and dependent on the needs of the home and the health considerations and developmental requirements of the student—not on the need of governments and corporations to rake in profits by forcing workers to remain in the workplace during the deadly pandemic. Achieving such an approach is possible only if all nonessential production is shut down until the pandemic is brought under control, with full compensation provided to all workers, so that parents are free to provide support to their children and shelter at home.

To fight for this program and support the struggle of the Beverley Public School EAs, teachers and school support staff in Canada and globally must form rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the pro-capitalist unions.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact